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AS WE REACH the end of the year, my thoughts turn — as they so often do — to the events of *Highlander II: The Quickening*. In that truly dire sequel, set in 2024, a hole in the ozone layer has resulted in the deaths of millions. An evil alien powermonger played by Michael Ironside, meanwhile, is saying things like, “The remains of your mortal wife. So frail. So earthy. So very dead.” In the real world, this year may have been riven by division and plagued by doomy headlines — but hey, at least it's not as bad as that. Plus, it's been an absolutely stonking 12 months for cinema and TV.

In our 16-page Review Of The Year, starting on page 63, we rake over the detritus of 2024, saluting the gleaming gems, the crazy moments, the jaw-droppingly gratuitous product placement. From *The Substance* to *Shōgun*, *Furiosa* to *Supacell*, it's been a vastly varied bonanza of a year, no matter what size screen you're watching. Check out our top 20 lists and let us know what you agree with, or what you think is missing.

It was a quiet year for Marvel movies (if you don't count the billion-dollar-grossing *Deadpool & Wolverine*, that is). But they're blasting back with a vengeance — you may have noticed the giant, ruddy Harrison Ford on our cover, the maddest he's been since the last junket question about lightsabers. What happens when a Red Hulk meets a vibranium shield? This ever-pertinent debate will finally be cleared up for good in February, with the arrival of *Captain America: Brave New World*, and from page 42 you can read the world's first major interviews with Ford, Anthony Mackie



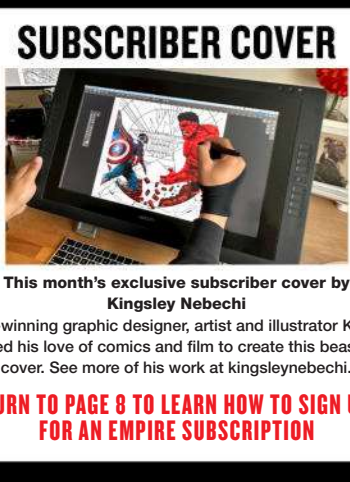
and more on the film. COVER STORY SMASH!

Finally, as we head into 2025 (the year in which, lest we forget, *Timecop 2: The Berlin Decision* is set), a hearty, Hulk-sized thank you to all of you reading. Without you, we wouldn't exist, and we massively appreciate your support. Enjoy the issue. And happy holidays.





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Kingsley Nebelch
Award-winning graphic designer, artist and illustrator Kingsley utilised his love of comics and film to create this beast of a subs cover. See more of his work at kingsleynebelch.co.uk

TURN TO PAGE 8 TO LEARN HOW TO SIGN UP FOR AN EMPIRE SUBSCRIPTION

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The British actor casts a Rey of light on her career to date.

DISPATCHES

TEAM EMPIRE ON A FEW OF OUR HIGH POINTS THIS MONTH



HELEN O'HARA WENT BACK TO MIDDLE-EARTH

"I rode, rode for ruin and the world's ending, hosting an Empire VIP Club screening of anime epic *The Lord Of The Rings: The War Of The Rohirrim*, and talking to the filmmakers. Turns out horses are really hard to animate; luckily the Mûmakil were easy-going."



JOANNA MORAN OVERSAW OUR WILLEM DAFOE PHOTOSHOOT

"Willem Dafoe joined us at the London studio of photographer Nadav Kander (pictured with the actor) for an amazing shoot. Dafoe told me his background was in movement and performance art — you can really see it in the finished product."



BETH WEBB VISITED JAPAN — VIA CATBUS

"Imagine a small child being let loose in an empty toy store after hours, and this is roughly akin to what I felt like while running amok in Ghibli Park when it was closed to the public during a recent trip to Japan. After that giddy and memorable visit, I now refuse to travel if it's not by catbus."



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EMPIRE COMMENT

LETTER OF THE MONTH



THE FORCE IS UNUSUALLY STRONG

My midi-chlorians must have been doing their thing, because once I got out of bed this morning and grabbed the next T-shirt in the drawer, what did I find waiting for me downstairs? The *Star Wars: Andor* subscriber issue.

STEPHEN COWIE, ALLOA, SCOTLAND

Even Master Yoda doesn't have a midi-chlorian count that high! For your well-coordinated T-shirt game, Stephen, have a Picturehouse membership on us.

Picturehouse

Empire's star letter wins a Picturehouse Membership, valid for one year at all Picturehouse Cinemas across the UK, including the flagship Picturehouse Central in London's West End. The Membership comes pre-loaded with five free tickets, and gets you access to exclusive discounts on food, snacks and drinks. When you write to us, please include your full contact details so we can arrange delivery of your prize.



ON OUR NOSFERATU REVIEW:

Got my tickets already. Looking forward to the sequel: 'Nosfera2'.

LOGAN THORNE

A RUBE AWAKENING

Whilst perusing the latest excellent edition of the mag, I was slightly horrified to see you refer to Wallace's inventions as 'Rube Goldbergian' [Wallace & Gromit: *Vengeance Most Fowl* review, #435] The correct reference would be W. Heath Robinson, a homegrown illustrator whose bonkers creations predate Goldberg's by years, and whose name was a byword for eccentric machinery.

STONE HITCHCOCK, VIA EMAIL

Appreciate your pedantry, Tone! But if we called Wallace's inventions 'Robinsonian', people might think we were referring to Summer Fruits double concentrate squash.



I am not a Tom Cruise fan. Nor a fan of coconut. But fuck me do I want to get on his coconut cake gifting list. How??

@PAULMADDOCK.BSKY.SOCIAL

MATRON, TAKE THEM AWAY!

How can you have a *Carry On* film without Sid James, Barbara Windsor and the amazing Kenneth Williams? Taron Egerton — never heard of him.

DAVID WESTROP, VIA EMAIL

We're hoping that Netflix's upcoming Taron Egerton/Jason Bateman airport thriller Carry-On will feature bawdy lines like, "Other end, nurse!"

THE BIG QUESTION

THIS MONTH WE ASKED:
WHAT FILM WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE REMADE WITH THE MUPPETS?



John Wick.

Keep Keanu.

@AMISMA.BSKY.SOCIAL

Denzel playing

it straight!

@ADRIANOGAZZA.
BSKY.SOCIAL

Call Me By Your

Name, with Timothée

Chalamet the only

holdover. Worth it for

the peach scene with

Gonzo alone.

@GAVINWHENMAN.

BSKY.SOCIAL

A Nightmare On Elm

Street. Keep Robert

Englund as Freddy.

See the stuffing fly.

@RODDERSJ04.

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Crimson Tide. Lots of

stressed Muppets

panicking in a

submarine with

Kramer Vs. Kramer.

Kermit and Piggy as

Dustin and Meryl.

@HANNAMADE.

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WATCH OUT FOR THE NEXT QUESTION VIA OUR
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PREVIOUSLY, IN EMPIRE...

THE VERY FIRST REVIEW OF THE YEAR DECEMBER 1989

This issue, we reflect on the last 12 months of movies in our 2024 Review Of The Year (see page 63). Which means we can also reflect on our first-ever Review Of The Year, from 35 years ago. Some things haven't changed: the box office was dominated by superheroes (Tim Burton's *Batman*) and sequels (*Indiana Jones And The Last Crusade*). But some things seem positively ancient: we reported on a "quiet revolution at

the video shop" with VHS tapes being sold for "under a tenner".

We noted now-beloved classics (*When Harry Met Sally*) and since-forgotten curios (*We Think The World Of You*) and awarded Best Bon Mot to Patrick Swayze in *Road House* ("It's my way or the highway!"). We also anointed 1989 as the year "that movie fans got their very own glossy monthly. Its name was *Empire* and it sails into the '90s with high hopes." High hopes indeed!



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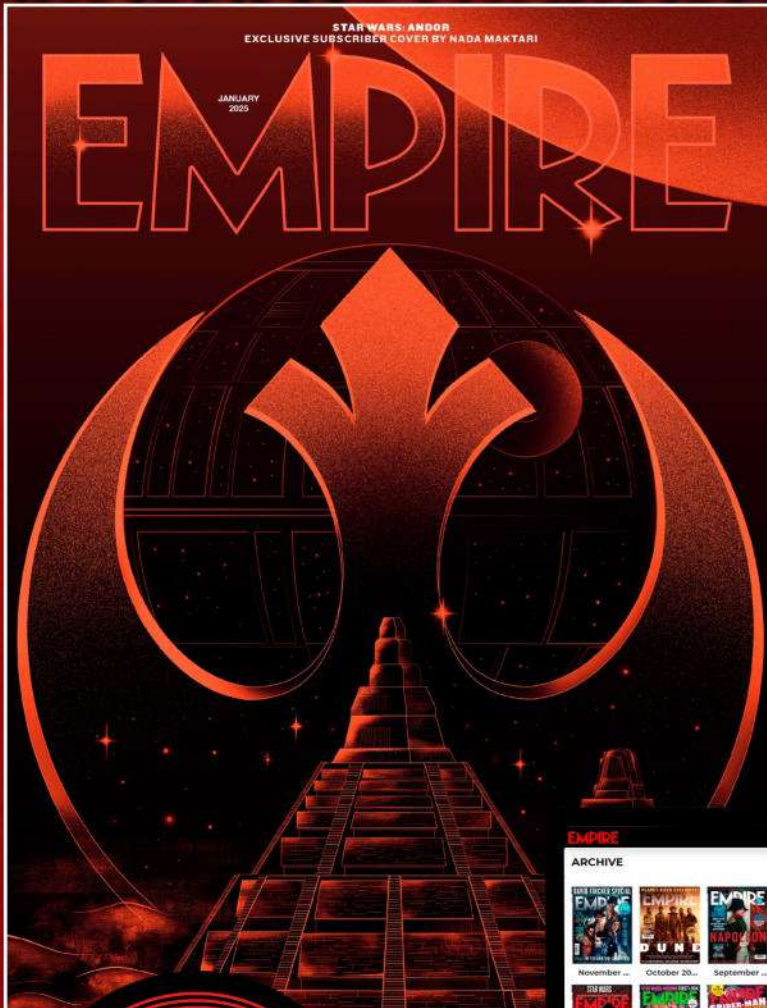
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first word

ALL THE ESSENTIAL INTEL, FROM HOLLYWOOD AND BEYOND

FEBRUARY 2025 | EDITED BY BETH WEBB

The yellow brick road to glory

EMPIRE INVESTIGATES THE PLANET-CONSUMING SUCCESS OF **WICKED** — AND WHAT IT MEANS FOR CINEMA WORDS **TOM ELLEN**

"IT'S BEEN OVERWHELMING," says *Wicked* director Jon M. Chu. "As a filmmaker your focus is just on making the thing, so to see the reactions — social media on fire, people adopting the dances, getting dressed up, standing ovations after 'Defying Gravity' — it's so satisfying. *Wicked* has become a cultural moment."

He's not wrong. Not since last summer's *Barbie* has a film taken over the entire planet quite so emphatically. From outlandish marketing stunts on landmarks like Paris' Arc de Triomphe and Dubai's Burj Khalifa (rebranding London's Greenwich as 'GreenWitch' was also particularly inspired), to a press tour that embedded the phrase "holding space" in the collective human consciousness, Chu's *Wicked Of Oz* prequel musical — adapted from the hit Broadway show — has become a true phenomenon. "We've had women coming out [of the cinema] crying," says Hallie Merrett, who works at the Everyman cinema in Egham, Surrey. "So many people [dressed up] in pink and green, girls wearing *Wicked* pyjamas and a whole family in *Wicked*

T-shirts. We beat our *Barbenheimer* record [on *Wicked's* opening weekend], which is a big thing."

Sneaking unseen into screenings in the US, Chu has witnessed similar sights: "People dragging their boyfriends or families along, and by the end they're all crying — it's incredible." The musical has, at the time of *Empire's* going to press, notched up \$375 million at the global box office, with some estimating it may pass the \$1 billion mark. All of which is a huge win for cinema in general. "This was always going to be a challenging year for the industry because of the [2023 actors' and writers'] strikes," *Screen International's* Charles Gant tells *Empire*. "We ended October [2024] really behind last year in terms of box-office numbers. But by the end of November, that gap had closed — and *Wicked* is a big part of that."

The film's mighty haul owes much to its marketing drive, which teamed *Wicked* with 400 household-name brands

(Starbucks came up with two upsettingly coloured beverages named Glinda's Pink Potion and Elphaba's Cold Brew), and unleashed eye-popping promo set-pieces from Mexico to South Korea (via 'GreenWitch'). "I've worked on *Star Wars*, *Frozen* and *Deadpool*, but *Wicked* is the biggest, most ambitious campaign [of my career]," says Julien Noble, Universal Pictures' President of International Marketing. "Outside of North America, the UK and Australia, many people don't know *The Wizard Of Oz*, so we were building from the ground up in 95 per cent of territories. We had to create these combustible moments worldwide, to spread FOMO and make *Wicked* a cultural imperative."

The stars of the movie proved expert FOMO-spreaders, too. The press tour saw Cynthia Erivo (playing green-skinned Wicked-Witch-to-be Elphaba) and Ariana Grande (Glinda 'The Good') serving up meme-worthy



Getty Images, Universal



moments left and right — be it weepy Q&As, blow-ups over fan-made posters or the aforementioned “holding space” interview (worth revisiting in all its bizarre, finger-tugging glory). When *Empire* catches up with Chu in early December, Oscar buzz for the film is growing — with murmurs of possible nominations for Best Picture, Best Actress for Erivo, and Grande for Best Supporting Actress. “I’m just happy people are loving the movie,” says Chu when we quiz him on the rumours. “Everyone [on the film] deserves all the recognition they can get.”

Whatever happens over awards season, *Wicked* fever is unlikely to let up soon. This movie is, after all, just part one — the second instalment is due late next year. If the second act of the Broadway show is anything to go by, it will be a darker affair, starting some time after the end of the first film when things in Oz are turning decidedly grim. “It’s about consequences of the choices made in part one,” Chu confirms. “It’s great that people fell in love with this relationship [between Elphaba and Glinda], because in *Part Two* it gets more intense.”

The question is, how can the sequel *possibly* top

Clockwise from main: Cynthia Erivo and Ariana Grande at *Wicked*’s LA premiere; *Out* magazine’s finger-tugging “holding space” interview; Glinda and Elphaba; The Burj Khalifa joins the party; Starbucks’ lurid *Wicked* potions; Erivo in the newly monickered ‘GreenWitch’; Director Jon M. Chu.

the seismic magnitude of the first film? Noble talks of having to “reinvent the wheel” for the marketing; making sure they don’t repeat the same FOMO-disseminating stunts. Chu, though, is confident he can replicate the magic on screen: “I’ve watched both movies next to each other, and all I’ll say is: we have the goods. Round two is a doozy.” Expect to see gravity defied again in 2025. **TOM ELLEN**

WICKED IS IN CINEMAS NOW





Crafting a menagerie of misfits

FLOW FILMMAKER GINTS ZILBALODIS ON CHANNELLING HIS EXPERIENCES (AND PETS) INTO HIS ANIMATED ADVENTURE

WORDS **BETH WEBB**

IT STARTED WITH a cat. Gints Zilbalodis' cat, to be precise, the inspiration for his 2012 film *Aqua* (about a water-phobic feline) and then the hero of his upcoming animated feature *Flow*. In the film — which is the Latvian entry for Best International Feature at the 2025 Academy Awards — a catastrophic flood has seized the human-less land of said cat, who must navigate the open waters on a boat with a haphazard ensemble of animals. “I wanted to focus more on the fear of others and of working together, because it was my first time making a film with the team,” admits Zilbalodis. Speaking with *Empire*, he delves into the origins of his creature creations.

CAT

The internet proved a treasure trove for Zilbalodis and his team, who watched endless cat videos when designing their small, nimble pawtagonist. In *Flow*'s world, felines are revered, with huge, mossy statues and hand-drawn



sketches honouring them — a sign that mankind once existed. In the original script the filmmaker had statues of humans in the cats' place, but later made the switch. “I felt like it would be a lot more emotional for this cat to see these statues underwater,” he explains.

DOG

An affable Labrador was the second character added, and was based on Zilbalodis' two dogs (both are credited at the end of the film). Most of the animals undergo a *Wizard Of Oz*-style journey in order to earn something they were missing; the dog finds agency away from his pack. “I didn't want [the film] to have this simple

message that being independent is bad and working together is good,” Zilbalodis explains.

CAPYBARA

Capturing the voice of this stoic, occasionally grunting rodent proved a challenge. “Our sound designer Gurwal [Coic-Gallas] went to a zoo and the capybara wasn't really saying anything,” Zilbalodis remembers. “He tried tickling [it], which was an interesting job, but the voice that the capybara [had] was very strange. It almost sounded like a tiny dog, very high pitched — not a very pleasant sound.” Voice actors were then tested, but after some trial and error and a little artistic licence, a baby camel's grumblings were

Getty Images

THE PLATFORM

“For years, Hollywood has been overusing exposition that makes zero sense”



AMELIA TAIT ON HER LOW TOLERANCE FOR MOVIE-DIALOGUE CLICHÉS

THE PREMISE OF *Paddington In Peru* is that Aunt Lucy is gone. “Gone, what do you mean, gone?” is not a question you’re asking right now, because everyone knows what “gone” means. Nonetheless, Hugh Bonneville’s Henry Brown does ask this of Olivia Colman’s cheery singing nun in the movie, because apparently no-one — from Carmela Soprano to Doctor Who to that breakdancing lion in *Madagascar* — understands that simple, four-letter word.

Which makes me, quite frankly, want to use a four-letter word myself. Apple TV+’s ‘60-set series *Palm Royale* also included the questionable question this year — “The gun, it’s gone!”, “What do you mean, gone?” — as did Netflix space show *The Signal*, adding a touch of originality with, “Gone? What does that mean?” As far as I can tell, the line’s been in use since (at least) 1947, when it cropped up in the noir *They Won’t Believe Me*. Well! I don’t believe this: for 77 years, Hollywood has been overusing an easy piece of exposition that makes zero sense. I mean, there are loads of words I don’t understand — what’s the deal with the two contradictory meanings of “nonplussed”? — but I’m pretty sure we’ve all mastered “gone”.

Listen, I get it. Movies are filled with utterances no-one really utters — things that none of us say in real life. In 2008, screenwriter Kevin Leane wrote ‘The Definitive List Of Clichéd Dialogue’,

corralling 121 examples from, “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” to, “Cover me! I’m going in.” Many of these have cropped up in recent films — number 39, “Did I just say that out loud?”, features in festive romcom *Meet Me Next Christmas*, while we can expect number 106, “Now that’s what I’m talking about!”, in *Thunderbolts* next year.

Yet the reason why, “Gone, what do you mean, gone?” (henceforth GWDYMG) rings so violently in my ears is because I don’t think we even recognise it as lazy writing. It doesn’t feature in Leane’s list. When we hear an actor say, “I have a bad feeling about this,” we understand what kind of film we’re watching — we understand the limits of the writers’ ambition. But GWDYMG sneaks in and slips by, popping up in prestigious and pulpy media alike. It’s there in *The Scarlet Pimpernel* and it features in *Beethoven’s Big Break*. You can hear it in *Downton Abbey* and it’s welcome in *The White Lotus* too. It’s simply too innocuous to annoy anyone. Except me.

The truth is, one day I might actually declare, “Guys, you’re gonna wanna see this!” — and sometime in the future, I really could say something about someone who is right behind me (isn’t he?). But I’d be extremely, extremely nonplussed if I ever uttered GWDYMG. Nonplussed? What do I mean, nonplussed?



Clockwise from main:
Animal magic: Capybara, lemur, dog and cat join forces; Director Gints Zilbalodis; Canine aid for puss before the initially hostile secretary bird.

used. “We needed the character to be peaceful and calm with a deeper voice.”

LEMUR

Offsetting the capybara’s tranquil vibe is a skittish, trinket-pilfering lemur. “It’s on the more cartoony side of all the characters,” Zilbalodis confirms. Each animal was chosen because of its personality, and how it might interact in its quest to be accepted by the others and itself. “Everything the lemur does is [in the name of] looking for a connection with others,” says Zilbalodis.

SECRETARY BIRD

“I didn’t want any villains in the film,” the director says. Of the five beasts brought together, however, the towering, majestic secretary bird finds itself in the most conflict. With one exception. “Its relationship with the cat is quite unique; they don’t really trust anyone else but they trust each other, and it’s not very explicit why that’s the case,” Zilbalodis summarises, while admitting that he relates to all of the animals on some level, not just his furry hero. They may not have human voices, but *Flow*’s small band of misfits speak to human nature at its most raw.

FLOW IS IN CINEMAS FROM 21 MARCH



It's off to the Best Picture races!

WITH NO CLEAR FRONTRUNNER IN SIGHT FOR 2025'S CROWNING ACADEMY AWARD, TEAM **EMPIRE** CHOOSE THEIR FIGHTERS

NICK DE SEMLYEN IS BETTING ON... **CONCLAVE**

What looked from afar like a ponderous Church drama (think: *Doubt*) in fact hit upon the Holy Trinity of Oscar buzz: it's packed with heavyweight actors, is about a serious topic, but yet is entertaining as hell. (In fact, it's been described by one social-media wag as "*Gossip Girl* in the Vatican".) Plus, this tale of scurrying cardinals and dramatic chimney smoke, shot like a '70s conspiracy thriller, is more likely to sway older Oscar voters than the edgier contenders. I'd tell you to put money on it, but that would contravene Hebrews 13:5.

BETH WEBB IS BETTING ON... **WICKED**

Something has changed within the Best Picture race. Something is not the same. Come the 2025 Academy Awards, it will have been 22 years since a musical (*Chicago*) claimed the big prize, and *Wicked* could be just the box-office-smashing hit to follow in its footsteps. The grounded performances from Ariana Grande and Cynthia Erivo especially elevate this faithful adaptation into more than just a song-for-song tribute. It's time to move on from the horror of *Cats* and accept that musicals are Oscar-worthy again.

JAMES DYER IS BETTING ON... **DUNE: PART TWO**

Sandworms, space nuns, and a saviour getting ripped to the tits on a mind-altering blue liqueur — surely there can be only one true frontrunner when it comes to this year's Oscars. After *Dune: Part One* was inexplicably robbed of its Best Picture gong by *CODA* in 2022 (not a gom jabbar in sight with that one) and Denis Villeneuve criminally didn't even get a Best Director nod (Harkonnen ballot-stuffing?), it's time for the Academy to wise up and make amends. *Dune: Part Two* is the only choice. LISAN AL GAIB!



Top to bottom: The gong show: *Conclave*; *Dune: Part Two*; *Nickel Boys*; *Wicked*; *The Brutalist*.

KAMBOLE CAMPBELL IS BETTING ON... **NICKEL BOYS**

If Academy members feel like rewarding creativity over spectacle, then they should look no further than *Nickel Boys*. RaMell Ross' fiction-film debut frames Black history through a unique first-person lens; that innovation landed him Best Director at the Gotham Awards in November. Nothing else this awards season has used a camera to show us new ways of looking — and isn't that the purest form of movie magic? Though it's about reckoning with the past, rooting for *Nickel Boys* feels like rooting for the future of the medium.

JOHN NUGENT IS BETTING ON... **THE BRUTALIST**

When you think of Hollywood glamour or Oscars prestige, your mind may not immediately go to "concrete". But Brady Corbet's third film is easily the Best Picture ever to feature detailed descriptions of cement aggregate. The ecstatic notices it has earned since its festival run make me hopeful that the Academy will recognise it for what it is: a true American epic, a beautifully made, beautifully acted, properly grown-up film. Yes, it is a buttock-brutalising three-and-a-half hours long, but with its 15-minute intermission, that lengthy runtime shouldn't be an impediment to Oscar voters with weak bladders.

THE 97TH ACADEMY AWARDS WILL
TAKE PLACE ON 2 MARCH

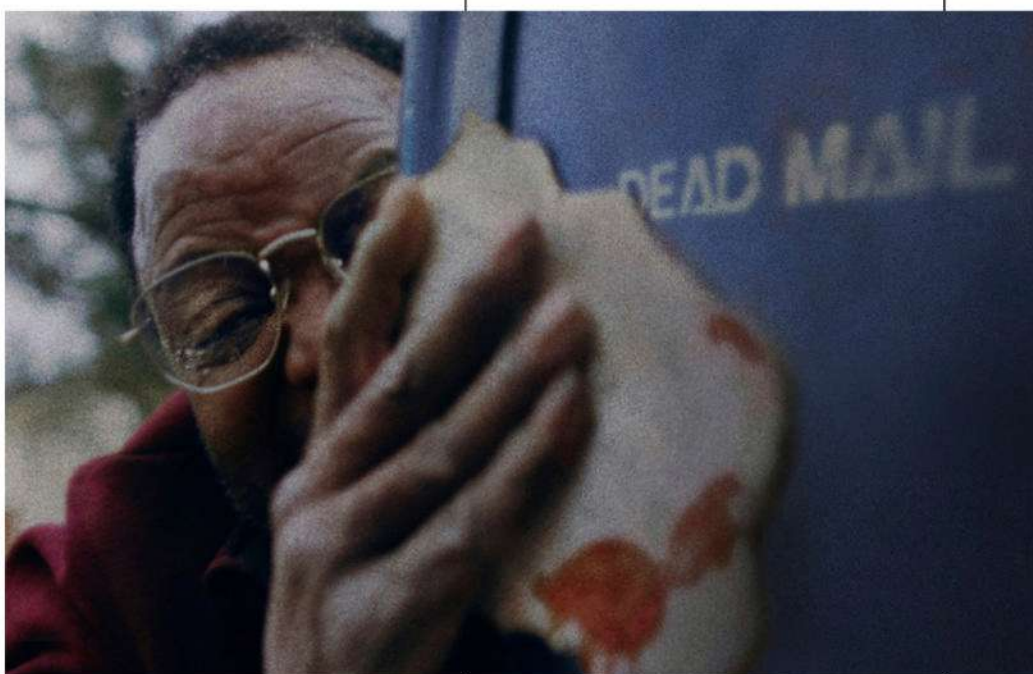
THE HORROR HIT THAT GOES POSTAL

THE FILMMAKERS BEHIND DEAD MAIL ARE PUTTING THEIR OWN STAMP ON THE GENRE

FIVE YEARS AGO, writer-director Joe DeBoer read about the 'dead letter office', a branch of the US postal office that investigates undeliverable mail. Enchanted by the peculiarity of this real-life organisation, he mentioned it to Kyle McConaghy, his filmmaking partner and best pal since sixth grade. A fellow horror-head, McConaghy was instantly struck by a vision of a woman crawling from a house, clutching a blood-streaked letter.

"We always fear being bland Midwest Americans, so we set out to take the riskier choice," says Missouri-born McConaghy of *Dead Mail*, the suspense-packed movie that stemmed from that first image, and has gone on to receive rave reviews following its South By Southwest premiere. He's not kidding; set in the mid-1980s, *Dead Mail* sees loner postal-worker Jasper (Tomas Boykin) tracking the aforementioned gory epistle after it falls into his hands. His investigation leads to a subculture of synthesiser technicians and a murderous scheme involving the villainous Trent (John Fleck) and his protégé Josh (Sterling Macer Jr), a gentle engineer.

"We had a Yamaha SK-20 that we dabbled on back in the day," explains DeBoer, who played in a Saint Louis-based band with McConaghy. "We're big Joy Division fans." In fact, the entire film, bizarre as it is, comes from reality: family photos presented the writer-directors with an '80s setting that favours neglect over neon ("You can almost smell it," chuckles McConaghy of the



Clockwise from main: Josh (Sterling Macer Jr) is desperate to get his 'help' letter posted; The letter in close-up; Trent (John Fleck) is bruised but not unbowed.



contains echoes of Lynch and Hitchcock — has surprised the duo. "We almost didn't submit to South By Southwest; it was like, 'Oh man, \$80, can we justify that?'" laughs DeBoer. "It's cool that people have embraced it."

The film continues to grow by word of mouth, bolstered by its prize-winning film-festival streak across America. *Dead Mail* — a red-letter day for genre cinema. **JAMIE GRAHAM**

DEAD MAIL DOES NOT YET HAVE A UK RELEASE DATE

BATMAN BARGAINS

YOU CAN KIT YOURSELF OUT AS GOTHAM'S PROTECTOR, IF YOU HAVE BRUCE WAYNE MONEY



THE BATMOBILE

PRICE: £2.3 MILLION

Ten Tumblers, as featured in Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight*, are now being sold by Warner Bros. Discovery's Global Consumer Products division. Each features Kevlar armour and smokescreen deployment, though sadly no flamey jet-engine.



THE BATARANG

PRICE: £43,000

The Caped Crusader's DIY boomerangs occasionally come up for auction at prop houses. This one, which Robert Pattinson used to sever an electrical cable in *The Batman*, sold for north of £40k, presumably to someone with an urgent electrical-cable problem.



THE BATSUIT

PRICE: £160,000

Yes, you too can don Bats' iconic cape, cowl and gadget-laden belt, as designed by costume supremo Lindy Hemming. At least, you can if you're the person who successfully bid for this in a Prop Store auction.

Let's hope they never meet the person who has the Bane costume.



THE BATCHAIR

PRICE: £16,000

Inspired by the design of Batman's mask, this sleek bum-warmer is the brainchild of retail company Wayne Enterprises, an "ultra-luxury commerce environment that immerses you in the world of DC's Bruce Wayne". Best get your Bat-credit-card out. **NICK DE SEMLYEN**

The Spotlight

Ethan Herisse

THE *NICKEL BOYS* BREAKOUT
STAR IS FINDING LIGHT IN THE
DARKEST STORIES

WORDS IANA MURRAY



DOMIZIA SALUEST

ACTING WASN'T THE first career choice for Ethan Herisse, the 24-year-old star of powerful historical drama *Nickel Boys*. In fact, when he was growing up in Massachusetts, he imagined a future on a court shooting hoops. "I was going to be a basketball player," he recalls, but there was one problem. "I was *not* good." When his younger sister, then participating in pageants, was approached to take part in acting workshops, Herisse tagged along and quickly discovered his real passion.

At age 11, his parents asked him if he wanted to pursue acting seriously. The answer was a no-brainer. "For them to hear that from an 11-year-old, and have enough faith in me that young to completely uproot their lives because I said that that was my dream..." he trails off in disbelief. His family moved to Los Angeles, where Herisse picked up small parts before he landed the role of Yusef Salaam, a real-life member of the Central Park Five, whose wrongful conviction and imprisonment in 1990 became the focus of Ava DuVernay's challenging miniseries, *When They See Us*. He had just graduated high school, he remembers: "I was thrust into this space where I was working with this phenomenal director in Ava and all of these other incredible actors and actresses."

When They See Us was Herisse's first time working on a project of such ambitious scale, but his devastating turn in *Nickel Boys* sees him level up, with the film receiving major awards buzz. The actor plays Elwood, a bright teenage boy sent to a reform school for a crime he didn't commit in Jim Crow's America. Despite the atrocities that Elwood endures, he finds a friend and confidant in Turner (Brandon Wilson), whose pragmatism counters Elwood's optimism. "When I first read the script, I admired how intelligent and kind he was, and how socially and politically



Above and right: Ethan Herisse, photographed exclusively for *Empire* at the Rosewood Hotel, London, on 15 October 2024. Far right: With Brandon Wilson in *Nickel Boys*.



BETWEEN SCENES

OUR SPOTLIGHT STAR'S FAVOURITE STUFF

THE SHOW

THE PENGUIN

"I just caught up on *Industry*, I'm rewatching *Succession*, and I'm watching *The Penguin* right now. All of the HBO stuff."

THE BOOK

STORY OF YOUR LIFE BY TED CHIANG

"The last book that I read was actually the collection of short stories that *Arrival* is based on. [They're] really cool."

THE ALBUM

CHARM BY CLAIRO

"*Charm* has been on repeat. One more that I've been listening to a good amount is the new JPEGMAFIA album [*I Lay Down My Life For You*]."

active he was for his age," says Herisse of his character. "Then I fell in love with his relationship with Turner, and how that was the light that you can find throughout the story."

Uniquely, *Nickel Boys* was almost entirely filmed with first-person point-of-view shots, and while most of Herisse's performance happens off-camera, the actor explains that he approached every scene as if the film was made traditionally: "Any time you hear my voice, I was there next to whoever was operating the camera."

Like Elwood and Turner, Herisse and Wilson became close friends. "We spent as much time off set as we did on set," Herisse says, noting that a lot of their downtime was spent at the restaurant chain Waffle House. "We ended up starting this thing called 'Waffle House Mondays' and we would invite producers, crew and cast." Even their director, RaMell Ross, eventually joined in on the tradition. "By the time we were leaving, though, my body was sick," Herisse adds, laughing. "I've been on a long hiatus."

Since the film's premiere at Telluride in August, Herisse has been on the festival circuit rubbing shoulders with filmmakers he'd love to work with: his dream list includes Barry Jenkins, *Waves* director Trey Edward Shults and Denis Villeneuve. "His movies are so grand," he says in praise of the *Dune* filmmaker. Should he ever need it, Herisse has a secret

weapon to lean on: a Bachelor's degree in Chemistry. He says his parents encouraged him to "experience life as much as you can", including school, which brought him to the University of California, Irvine, where he discovered that, unlike basketball, he was good at chemistry.

And he enjoyed it, too. "If I've got to do some organic synthesis one day for a stint in my life, I guess I'd be okay," he jokes. Judging by the success of *Nickel Boys*, however, hopefully Herisse can leave the lab behind and look to a synthesis-less future.

NICKEL BOYS IS IN CINEMAS FROM 3 JANUARY

Stylist: Jason Rembert. Groomer: Min Sandhu using Medik 8. Jacket and jeans: Feng Chen Wang; Turtleneck: Reiss; Boots: Roker. Additional imagery: Getty Images, Imago

WHY HOLLYWOOD CAN'T QUIT CADY

WITH A SERIALISED TAKE ON CAPE FEAR HEADED TO APPLE TV+, WE CHART THE JOURNEY OF AN ICONIC VILLAIN'S STORY

1957 THE BOOK

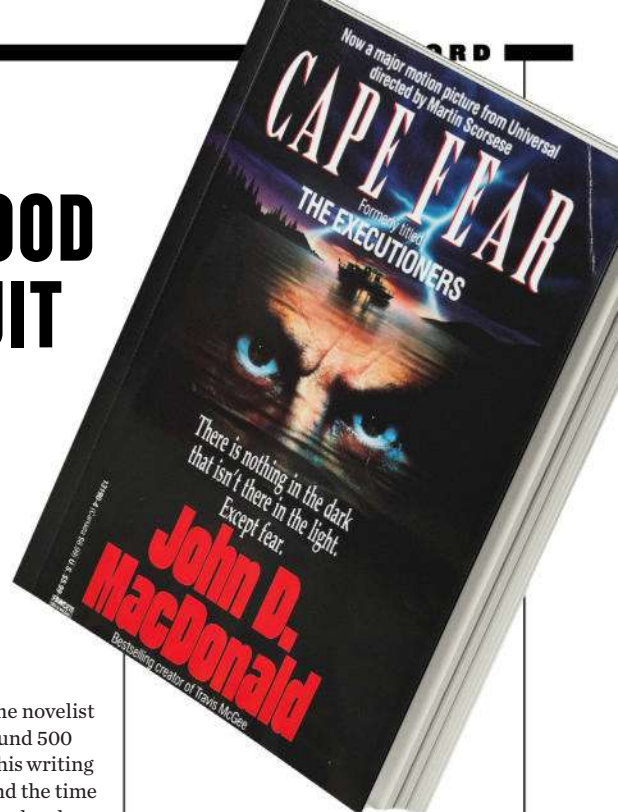
Fast-fingered American crime novelist John D. MacDonald had around 500 short stories published over his writing career. Yet he somehow found the time to cook up *The Executioners*, a hard-boiled thriller about attorney Sam Bowden; Max Cady, a violent sex offender who he helps to imprison; and the vengeful terror that Cady inflicts upon Bowden's family upon release. The movie rights for the tense two-hander were scooped up a year after publication.

1962 THE FIRST ADAPTATION

Gregory Peck acquired *The Executioners* from filmmaker Cornel Wilde under the banner of his company Melville Productions, casting himself as the forthright Bowden under J. Lee Thompson's direction. Robert Mitchum was approached to play Cady but had reservations about the dark nature of the character. That was until Peck sent him flowers and a case of Bourbon to secure the role. Peck also changed the title, believing that geographically named films worked especially well. He scanned a map of America until he found Cape Fear in North Carolina.

1991 THE SECOND ADAPTATION

Peck and Mitchum would go on to play small roles in Martin Scorsese's take on the story. This version was originally developed by Steven Spielberg, who reportedly wanted Bill Murray in the Cady role. Ultimately deterred by the film's violence, Spielberg passed the project along to a post-*GoodFellas* Scorsese, but remained aboard as producer. Robert De Niro was cast as Cady, and Harrison Ford was courted for Bowden but was only interested in the film's showier villain role. (The role of Bowden



Above: The 1957 novel which inspired *Cape Fear*. Below: Cady castings: Robert Mitchum, Javier Bardem and Robert De Niro.

ultimately went to Nick Nolte). Making just over \$182 million, it was Scorsese's most profitable film to date.

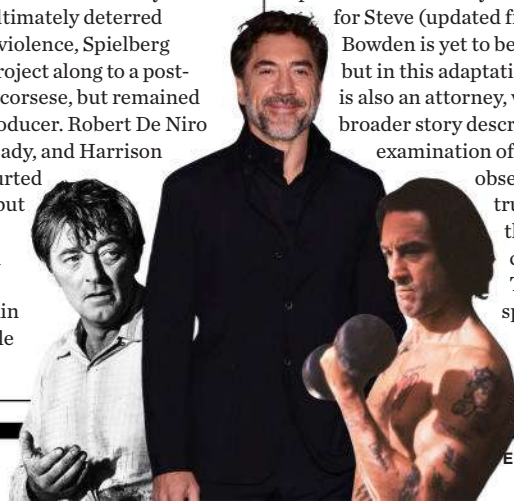
1993 THE HOMAGE

Cape Fear has permeated pop culture, with references popping up in everything from *Seinfeld* to *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle*. But the most iconic was *The Simpsons* episode 'Cape Feare', in which formerly incarcerated entertainer Sideshow Bob (Kelsey Grammer) seeks stabby revenge on Bart for helping to put him in prison. Everything from De Niro's cigar-smoking cinema scene to the houseboat were given the Springfield treatment, with the episode hailed as one of *The Simpsons*' finest.

TBC THE SHOW

Decades later, Scorsese and Spielberg are reuniting to executive-produce Apple TV+'s new adaptation. They're joined by Javier Bardem, who will exec-produce and star in the ten-episode series as Cady. Casting for Steve (updated from Sam) Bowden is yet to be confirmed, but in this adaptation his wife is also an attorney, with the broader story described as "an examination of America's obsession with true crime in the 21st century". Time to spark up that cigar again.

BETH WEBB



Steven Soderbergh faces his fears

THE FILMMAKER CONTINUES TO VENTURE INTO THE UNKNOWN WITH HAUNTED-HOUSE MOVIE PRESENCE

WORDS **BETH WEBB**

"THERE HAS TO be an aspect of it that scares me. There's got to be something that's keeping me up at night." Steven Soderbergh is telling *Empire* about his motivations as a filmmaker. For his upcoming movie *Presence*, that fear can be attributed to a few things. Firstly, it's about a mysterious, invisible entity floating around the confines of an old family home, a premise inspired by a series of occurrences involving a deceased woman witnessed in Soderbergh's own abode by his housesitter. "There were incidents in the early years of, 'Did I leave that light on? Was that door really closed?'" he remembers. "But I have to say, that all stopped, like, four or five years ago. I think either she moved on or [was] bored."

Secondly, the film — which follows Lucy Liu's businesswoman and her family settling into the house along with their own set of problems — was shot entirely from the presence's point of view. And it was filmed by Soderbergh, who carried his Sony A7 camera throughout the story's single location in New Jersey: "Day to day, my job was literally to figure out how to not fall down or up the stairs."



Illustration: Russell Moorcroft

NEED TO KNOW

GET UP TO SPEED ON...

PAUL THOMAS ANDERSON'S NEXT MOVIE



IT'S PTA'S MOST EXPENSIVE FILM YET

In Hollywood terms, the *Magnolia* filmmaker has never been a big spender.

Over the course of his career, the director has conjured some of the greatest films ever made without ever exceeding a budget of \$40 million. That frugal track record looks set to end with his next outing. Budget estimates for his yet-to-be-named feature, which wrapped shooting in September, have ranged from \$140 million up to \$175 million, putting PTA almost in Marvel territory.

IT'S GOT A HELL OF A CAST

Nothing is confirmed about the film's plot — but its cast list alone is enough to send excitement levels soaring.

A handlebar-moustache-sporting Leonardo DiCaprio leads the line-up — his first collaboration with Anderson — joined by Regina Hall and Benicio Del Toro. Plus there's a *Licorice Pizza* reunion for the director, Alana Haim and Sean Penn.

IT MIGHT BE BE A PTA-PYNCHON REUNION

The most persistent rumour, plot-wise, is that the mystery movie is an adaptation of the 1990 novel *Vineland* by Thomas Pynchon, whose hippie noir *Inherent Vice* Anderson adapted in 2014. Set in California — where much of the film was shot on location this year — *Vineland* is

a Reagan-era romp featuring anti-fascist militias, Mob bosses, undead creatures and a punk band called Billy Barf And The Vomitoes. In other words: let's pray this rumour is true.

IT'S NOT JUST A FILM... IT'S A "BALLROOM DANCE"

A bizarre piece of set paraphernalia was recently unearthed on eBay, in the form of a coin — seemingly presented to the film's cast and crew — with "Wet N' Stinky Fuck-Devils Brigade" emblazoned on one side, and "A Paul Thomas Anderson Motion Picture Extravaganza & Ballroom Dance" on the other. The coin also bears the name Col. Steven J. Lockjaw, a skull, two guns and the American flag. What on Earth it means, we don't know — but we can't wait to find out.

IT SHOULD LOOK SPECTACULAR

It has been suggested that the movie is to contain major action set-pieces and fight sequences. Distributor Warner Bros. has already dubbed it an "event film", and it will be the first of Anderson's movies to be released in IMAX cinemas. Is PTA gearing up to become the new king of the 'intelligent blockbuster'? Christopher Nolan, watch your back... **TOM ELLEN**

THE UNTITLED PAUL THOMAS ANDERSON FILM

IS IN CINEMAS FROM 8 AUGUST

The whole concept came brimming with challenges; despite intense rehearsals, Soderbergh would watch back a lengthy scene that he'd shot to find that someone wasn't framed correctly or he'd made the wrong call, timing-wise. But then, he's no stranger to moving the needle conceptually; he shot his 2018 psychological thriller *Unsane* entirely on an iPhone 7 Plus. 2022's *Kimi* follows an agoraphobic tech worker (Zoë Kravitz) and also largely took place in one setting.

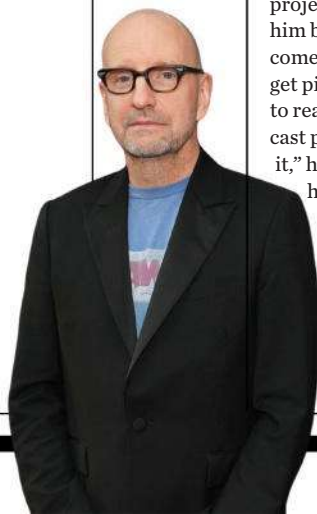
Both *Kimi* and *Presence* were written by David Koepp. "He calls them 'box movies', and he finds them very exciting," laughs Soderbergh. "He's like, 'Give me a sandbox that's a very specific size and shape, whether it's one location, or it's [set in] 24 hours, or some restriction.' He [then] feels unleashed to come up with all the different ways that [he] can push up against the edges of that box." It's a collaboration that works well for Soderbergh; in fact, when we talk he's in a room in London, a Blofeld-style cat behind him, cooking up a new film with the screenwriter. "We have the film I'm here trying to finish now [that] David wrote, and I pitched him one more idea that falls into the box category that I want him to write for me. So hopefully he's going to do that soon."

Yet even with his bigger studio films, Soderbergh is still chasing his fears. Take his upcoming spy drama *Black Bag*, to be released in March and with a mammoth cast including Cate Blanchett, Michael Fassbender and Tom Burke, which features a 12-page dinner scene in which nobody moves. "This is a director's nightmare," he declares. "I had to come up with a way to keep that interesting without ever calling attention to myself and distracting the audience out of insecurity. That was one of the more challenging things I've ever had to figure out."

Presence's haunted-house-with-a-twist is a spectral experiment for the filmmaker; a chance to explore a phantom's purgatory and how it plays upon the living. Now he has his sights set elsewhere. If the multiple projects with Koepp aren't enough to keep him busy, he's holding out hope that a shocking comedy he wanted to develop will eventually get picked up. "It was a comedy designed to really provoke people and I had a fantastic cast put together, and nobody would touch it," he admits. Yet there is still one genre he won't touch: the Western. "I'm terrified of horses," he confesses. Given the sheer number of films he's currently working on, this may be the only thing left keeping him up at night before long.

PRESENCE IS IN CINEMAS FROM 24 JANUARY

Top to bottom: Chloe (Callina Liang) senses some paranormal activity; The doorbell footage from tonight would be good; Time to call Dan Aykroyd. **Below:** Director Steven Soderbergh.





From secrets and lies to honest words

MIKE LEIGH AND MARIANNE JEAN-BAPTISTE ON REUNITING FOR DARK COMEDY *HARD TRUTHS* WORDS IAN FREER

WRITER-DIRECTOR MIKE LEIGH first collaborated on film with actor Marianne Jean-Baptiste on the Oscar-nominated *Secrets & Lies*. Almost 30 years later, the pair are back with *Hard Truths*, a powerful character study of Pansy (Jean-Baptiste), a belligerent, difficult woman — she rants at shop-workers — who is clearly in some kind of deep-rooted pain. The pair tell *Empire* about their decades-long partnership, creating characters and — obviously — the next James Bond film.

Your first time working together was on Mike's play, *It's A Great Big Shame*, at the Theatre Royal, Stratford East, in London. How was that?

Mike Leigh: When [Marianne] came and auditioned, it was obvious that this was a smart character actor with a sense of humour and a sense of life. We just clicked. She played an upwardly mobile snob of a lady. She was terribly good.

Marianne Jean-Baptiste: It was a great adventure. I just loved it. Just recently being out of drama school, you were still spongy and wanted to learn as much as you could. It was a dream job.

Your first film collaboration, *Secrets & Lies*, garnered Oscar attention in 1997. What are your memories of the big night?

Leigh: The ultimate memory was we sat in the

stalls near the stage, surrounded by people from *The English Patient* which got all the Oscars. When Juliette Binoche got Best Supporting Actress for *The English Patient*, she walked over to you and said, "You should have got this."

Jean-Baptiste: It was surreal.

Leigh: And she should have got it. Apart from anything else, she would have been the first British Black actor to get an Oscar.

Jean-Baptiste: It was just good to be there. Back then you still had this sense that independent films would never be on a red carpet. Now, red carpets are everywhere.

So how did *Hard Truths* happen all these years later?

Leigh: Well, we'd kept in touch over the years and it just seemed time to get on with it really. We were going to make the film earlier, but the pandemic put paid to that. But we've been talking for a while.

How did you go about creating the character of Pansy?

Jean-Baptiste: That process starts with us writing a list of real people that we know from life and whittling it down until we land on about two or three.

Leigh: The whittling down is my choice, because it's the dramatist's responsibility.



Jean-Baptiste: We merge those characters to build a new character from scratch. We're talking them into existence by creating their history; where they were born, who their parents were, where they went to school.

Leigh: It's not just about talking. There's also moving around because it's about physical acting as well.

Marianne, didn't you go to the supermarket as Pansy?

Jean-Baptiste: Yes, as Pansy, but [keeping

Left, top to bottom: An angry Pansy (Marianne Jean-Baptiste) makes her point; With sunny sister Chantelle (Michele Austin); A tough call. **Below:** Jean-Baptiste, reunited with her *Secrets & Lies* director, Mike Leigh.



Pansy in check]. Mike wouldn't [let unmonitored Pansy go to the supermarket] because it would be irresponsible, knowing the sort of character she is. The instruction was just to lightly get into character and feel how she is seeing things.

What's the joy of your collaboration together?

Jean-Baptiste: For me, it's freedom. It's being treated as an intelligent, creative person who has skills and can do more than just stand on a mark and deliver a line. Somebody making you go home with a headache at the end of the day because you've just been working so hard, but in a satisfying way. On other films, you become quite director-proof and you get on with it. It's great with Mike to be able to trust and just let go.

Leigh: It's very straightforward. I like character actors, people that don't just play themselves. I like intelligent actors. Not all actors are intelligent. I enjoy actors with a sense of humour and who are going to be comfortable with being part of an ensemble. Marianne is all those things.

Finally, EON are currently looking for a new Bond director. Mike, if they offered it to you, what would you do with it?

Leigh: The entire film would be James Bond going to visit his elderly mother in a suburban house, spending a bit of time with her and then leaving. That would be it.

Jean-Baptiste: I want to be the criminal mastermind.

Leigh: Hiding in the woodshed.

HARD TRUTHS IS IN CINEMAS FROM 31 JANUARY

Bill Skarsgård, unrecognisable as the Count in *Nosferatu*.

Bottom: And fresh-faced in his civvies.

THE KEY TO UNLOCKING ORLOK

BILL SKARSGÅRD ON EMBRACING THE INFAMOUS UNDEAD COUNT IN *NOSFERATU*

BILL SKARSGÅRD SCOFFED when Robert Eggers suggested he might, one day, be the right person to play walking corpse Count Orlok. This was 2016: Skarsgård loved Eggers' debut film *The Witch*, met him for a general chinwag, and Eggers told him all about the *Nosferatu* remake he was planning. Back then, Eggers was looking at other actors for the role. "But at one point he said, 'If you were a bit older, you could probably do it.' And I said, 'Oh, I don't know about that,'" laughs Skarsgård, now 34. He felt too young, yes, but also inexperienced.

Eggers tried a couple of times to get *Nosferatu* off the ground over those years, but finally, when the pieces fell into place, he came back to Skarsgård. And with further acting chops — and confidence — in the bank, Skarsgård took it on. Fully. His Orlok is a demonic, disgusting creature who consumes all — and consumed Skarsgård too. "He's been dormant and asleep and for a long time," explains the actor of the Transylvanian vampire, "and then Ellen [Hutter, Lily-Rose Depp]

awakes him and becomes his obsession, his last hurrah, his Hail Mary."

Skarsgård approached the role with similar obsession, inhabiting Orlok on multiple levels, getting used to enveloping prosthetics and working with an opera singer to lower his voice an octave. "The voice was the thing I worked the hardest at," he says. "For a month-and-a-half leading up to the shoot, I didn't do much else than just record myself. And on set, I would keep doing these exercises. It sounds kind of like Mongolian throat-singing. It's [insane]."

When it was time to let it all go, he did so gladly. "It was a relief," he says. "It really affected me. Orlok is an occult sorcerer, and it did a number on me in terms of just trying to inhabit that space. When we were done with it, I was like, 'I never want to play something this evil again. I never want to put on prosthetics ever again.' But I'm proud of it." The darkness was in him all along. **ALEX GODFREY**

NOSFERATU IS IN CINEMAS FROM 1 JANUARY





On A Role

STEPHEN GRAHAM IS HENRY 'SUGAR' GOODSON

THE ACTOR PLAYS AN EAST END BOXER IN PERIOD SERIES A THOUSAND BLOWS

WORDS SOPHIE BUTCHER

THE BODY

Stephen Graham's first step when getting into character for Steven Knight's Victorian-era drama was transforming his body into that of a seasoned, fearsome bare-knuckle fighter. "My objective was to get big," he tells *Empire*. "I thought, 'I'm going to eat — literally — sleep, dream this character,' in terms of the physicality." The actor seriously bulked up, thanks to an intense workout routine. "It was five solid days a week of training, five meals a day, loads of protein, ice baths," he remembers. "I became like a proper athlete." At points, Graham didn't even recognise himself. "I've never been that big," he says. "It changed the way I sat, the way I conducted myself. The first day of filming, the director went, 'Do you want to look at the



Top to bottom: Stephen Graham bulks up for the role of Sugar Goodson in *A Thousand Blows*; Bob Hoskins in *The Long Good Friday*; Ray Winstone in *Nil By Mouth*.

playback?" And I remember going, 'Is that me?!' I couldn't believe it."

THE INSPIRATIONS

Two screen icons were big influences for Graham when crafting Sugar. "I watched a lot of Ray Winstone," he says. "How he carries himself, his demeanour. And a lot of Bob Hoskins. I watched *The Long Good Friday* and *Nil By Mouth* over and over." More than just their performances, Graham found connection between the stars' personal stories, Sugar's, and his own. "They're two of my heroes, because

they're working-class actors," he explains. "They're people from similar backgrounds to me who've gone out there and paved the way. [Sugar] fought for everything he got in his life. He came from nothing."

THE ACCENT

A Thousand Blows sees Graham ditch his native Scouse accent for a Cockney twang. Watching Winstone and Hoskins served as a starting point, but dialect coach Sarah McGuinness helped him nail it down, sending tapes of East End dockers' accents. "And then," Graham says, "it's finding something that grounds the character. I speak through my nose. But with [Sugar], it was finding that resonance down here (points to his chest)." Cor blimey, guv'nor — sounds like hard work.

THE SONG

Sugar is a different kind of role for Graham — one that required him to turn inwards. "The characters I normally play wear their hearts on their sleeve," he says. "They're very emotive. But I wanted to make [Sugar] very stoic, present; a man of few words." Part of that was developing the confidence to be someone who, "when he goes into a room, feels like he owns it" — but it also meant finding ways into the boxer's buried-deep emotions, including through music. "There's a song that, to me, was Sugar," Graham says, scrolling through his phone. "'On The Nature Of Daylight', by Max Richter. It has that tortured feeling of someone who wants love, but is so jaded, he never feels worthy of it. It's very melancholic, but beautiful. I listened to it constantly." One for your playlist, courtesy of Stephen Graham.

A THOUSAND BLOWS IS ON DISNEY+ IN EARLY 2025

A GOLF-COMEDY SEQUEL TEES UP

WHY ADAM SANDLER'S INCOMING HAPPY GILMORE SEQUEL IS CAUSING A STIR

IT'S BEEN ALMOST 30 years since *Happy Gilmore* turned Adam Sandler from *SNL* star into movie A-lister virtually overnight (and which, along with *Billy Madison*, inspired the name of his production company, Happy Madison). Yet a sequel felt inevitable; from the moment Sandler first raised his club in anger as the titular ice-hockey player (with rage issues) turned golf player (with rage issues), his petulant screen persona meshed perfectly with the film's endlessly quotable dialogue ("I eat pieces of shit like you for breakfast"/"You eat pieces of shit for breakfast?"). It became an enduring pop-culture hit: pro golfers even took to recreating his iconic, unorthodox swing on the course for the film's 25th anniversary.

To measure the anticipation for *Happy Gilmore 2* — helmed by *Murder Mystery* director Kyle Newacheck — you need only look to the open auditions that Netflix held in August for New Jersey locals to appear in the film. An estimated 12,000 people showed up at the Hyatt Regency in Morristown, some wearing *Gilmore* paraphernalia, and queued throughout the day for the chance to appear alongside Sandler and a returning cast including Ben Stiller (as a nursing-home orderly), Julie Bowen (as



Clockwise from main: Adam Sandler gets a taste for golf in *Happy Gilmore*; Ben Stiller dons scrubs as a carer in the first film; The sequel's director, Kyle Newacheck, on set of 2018's *Game Over, Man!*.

partner Virginia Venit) and Christopher McDonald (as the villainous Shooter McGavin, who recently made a surprise cameo in *Beverly Hills Cop: Axel F*).

Joining them will be more buzzy cameos than you can shake a 9 iron at, with the likes of Benny Safdie, Bad Bunny, Margaret Qualley and Travis Kelce on the roster. "You inspired an entire generation to get on the golf course," Kelce said in a recent interview with Sandler. "We were hockey players growing up, so we used

to go up to the public course all the time, and just wanted to absolutely hammer them and hit them with the *Happy Gilmore* swing." Golf pro Rory McIlroy has also been heard talking about filming a scene, and if this thing isn't stuffed with some of the sport's biggest names, someone hasn't been able to see the woods for the trees.

With the year ahead stuffed with sequels, *Happy Gilmore 2* might just represent the biggest swing of them all. And, unless *Avatar's* Parker Selfridge has really improved his putting stroke, Happy is almost certain to be the best on-screen golfer as well. Fore! **CHRIS HEWITT**

ON OUR MINDS

DAFT MUSINGS FROM THE WARPED MINDS OF TEAM EMPIRE



BILL McCONKEY



BETH WEBB IS THINKING ABOUT... LIMITLESS LOOKALIKE CONTESTS

Several actor tribute events have popped up recently, with the likes of Dev Patel and Paul Mescal imitated by attendees. But why stop at the young men? I want Sean Bean lookalikes congregating in Sheffield. Brian Blessed-ites thrashing it out in Mexborough.



ALEX GODFREY IS THINKING ABOUT... DAMN DIRTY DOGS

Ever since I heard that Snoop Dogg wants to make a movie inspired by *Planet Of The Apes* "but just imagine it was dogs instead of apes",

I have of course been obsessed. Do the dogs sound like Snoop? Do they smoke blunts? I need answers!



SOPHIE BUTCHER IS THINKING ABOUT... DANNY DYER'S DICKIE-BOW PASTA

The *Rivals* star's episode of Ed Gamble and James Acaster's podcast *Off Menu* might be my favourite, with talk of moustaches, the after-effects of spicy food, 'dickie-bow'-shaped pasta, buying Bentleys, and (of course) vast amounts of swearing...

The ultimate anti-romance

JACK QUAID AND SOPHIE THATCHER ON THEIR BOUNDARY-PUSHING THRILLER COMPANION

WORDS SOPHIE BUTCHER

A HAND ON FIRE. Rupert Friend, stabbed in the neck. Gallons of blood. These are just some of the brutal delights in *Companion*, a twist-laden thriller from writer-director Drew Hancock, and produced by Zach Cregger, whose last film *Barbarian* was a tense word-of-mouth hit. It stars *The Boys*' Jack Quaid and *Heretic*'s Sophie Thatcher as Josh and Iris, a couple whose relationship takes a dark turn during a trip

away with friends. The pair discuss forging their unique connection.

ACCLIMATISING TO THE SCRIPT

Sophie Thatcher: I was shocked, I was intimidated. I couldn't ever imagine playing this role, and I've never really had that before.

Jack Quaid: I got an email, and I remember seeing the words: "From the team that did (all

caps) *BARBARIAN*." As an actor, when you read something for the first time, that's when you get to be like a fan – and when every reveal hit, I was blown away.

Thatcher: [Iris] has such an intense emotional shift, I was just focused on mapping that out and making sure it was naturalistic and believable. [Iris] is a hero, and I've never gotten to play such a strong character.

THE PIPELINE

EIGHT PROJECTS IN DEVELOPMENT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT

WORDS JORDAN KING

CANYON

Don Cheadle is gearing up to play a part-time jazz musician and full-time killer in a thriller from *John Wick* creator Derek Kolstad. Unfolding over a single night, the movie sees Cheadle's deadly prodigy trying to protect a young vocalist caught up in a turf war.



PAPER TIGER

Anne Hathaway, Jeremy Strong and Adam Driver will spearhead James Gray's next film. An original crime thriller written by Gray himself, the movie follows two brothers whose pursuit of the American Dream is jeopardised when a too-good-to-be-true scheme turns out to be, well, precisely that.



HALF MAN

Richard Gadd and Jamie Bell are set to play brothers in a new BBC/HBO series written by the *Baby Reindeer* creator. Spanning 40 years, the show — due to hit our screens in 2026 — explores manhood through the brothers' evolving relationship in an ever-changing world.





Quaid: Josh is not someone I'd call a good guy — but to him, he is. He's the protagonist of his own story. For me, [it] was not judging him too much, because I just didn't want to play-act a cartoonish bad guy.

TAPPING INTO THEIR HORROR ORIGINS

Thatcher: I've been a huge fan of the genre. I grew up on the movie *28 Days Later*. I used to



make zombie movies with my twin. For me, [being in horror movies] is fun because you go to the greatest extent of your emotions, and it feels like therapy. Days where I get to fully let myself go feels like a release that I need.

Quaid: I grew up as a scaredy-cat. I remember trick-or-treating when I was a kid — the original *Scream* had just come out and I'd be hiding from the kids dressed as Ghostface, because they

Far left: They only have eyes for each other: Josh (Jack Quaid) and Iris (Sophie Thatcher). **Left, top to bottom:** Iris makes contact; Josh is taken to the edge; Iris feels the heat.

had those masks where if you pumped this thing, blood would run down their face. And then I played a Ghostface?! It's just insane. It's a very surreal thing. I'll be at conventions signing knives that people dressed as Ghostface come with, and I'm like, "What happened?!"

MAKING FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Quaid: We have mutual friends — like Jasmin Savoy Brown, who [Sophie] knows from *Yellowjackets* and I know from *Scream*. She sent us both a text the day before we met being like, "I'm so happy you two are working together!"

Thatcher: It was on the camera test day. Immediately we were thrown into being a couple, taking selfies.

Quaid: The relationship between Josh and Iris is so complicated, to work with someone as talented as Sophie was a joy. I think chemistry is bred from two people who are willing to listen to each other, and Sophie's an unbelievable listener. I also realised that if there was ever a moment where it felt our relationship was a bit off, it served us, because our relationship in the film is a bit off.

LETTING OFF STEAM

Thatcher: Everybody knows I love karaoke. So we went, I think it was at the Best Western, and there was this guy randomly singing songs, and then Lukas [Gage, their co-star] took over boldly. He sang...

Quaid: 'Tennessee Whiskey'.

Thatcher: Yes!

Quaid: I only know because I have a video on my phone.

Thatcher: Then I sang Weezer. I think karaoke is the best kind of bonding. It's the therapy we all need. **SOPHIE BUTCHER**

COMPANION IS IN CINEMAS FROM 31 JANUARY

UNTITLED JESSE EISENBERG MUSICAL

Julianne Moore and Paul Giamatti will co-star in Jesse Eisenberg's next directorial effort. A musical comedy featuring Eisenberg-penned tunes, the movie centres on a shy woman (Moore) who falls under the spell of an enigmatic director (Giamatti) when she's cast in his show.

THE BARRIER

Conclave director Edward Berger has found the lead for his upcoming time-travel movie in the shape of **Austin Butler**. Plot specifics for the film, based on a MacMillan Hedges short story, are currently closely guarded, but sources tantalisingly describe it as *Interstellar* meets *Top Gun*.

UNTITLED CHRISTOPHER NOLAN MOVIE

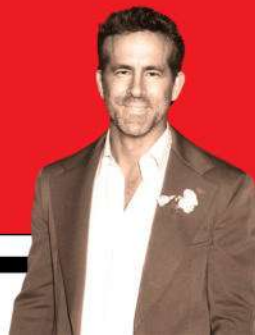
The *Oppenheimer* director's new film has added **Charlize Theron** to its constellation of stars. Theron will star alongside Tom Holland, Lupita Nyong'o, Matt Damon, Anne Hathaway, Robert Pattinson and Zendaya in the film, which shoots early next year.

MIGHTY MOUSE

Eighty-two years since his creation, legendary 'toon *Mighty Mouse* is finally getting the big-screen treatment. Paramount Animation are teaming up with **Ryan Reynolds'** Maximum Effort Productions and *Free Guy* scribe Matt Lieberman to make the film, based on the Superman-riffing rodent superhero.

STITCHES

In a meta move, **Angelina Jolie** will play a filmmaker navigating Paris Fashion Week in the latest movie from *Proxima* director Anna Winocour. Ella Rumpf (*Raw*) and Louis Garrel (*The Three Musketeers*) will star opposite Jolie in the film, which is shooting already in Paris.



The fruit-busting stunt that made history

EMPIRE REPORTS FROM THE SET OF FOLKLORE-INSPIRED EPIC WILLIAM TELL

WORDS NEIL SMITH

A FULL-SCALE facsimile of a 14th-century Swiss village is not where *Empire* expected to end up an hour on from landing at Rome's Fiumicino Airport. Yet here we are, amid gatehouses, battlements and market stalls groaning with fabricated victuals, on the set of action-heavy saga *William Tell*. The film stars Claes Bang as the Swiss folk hero, who, according to legend, shot an apple off his son's head with a crossbow, a stunt that will be the focus of today's shoot. Bang and director Nick Hamm tell us about pulling off the legacy-defining act.

APPROACH THE MARK

"It's a massive choice Tell has to make," Bang says of the legendary marksman. "How do you go about making sense of something like that?" The actor had heard of Friedrich Schiller's play about the marksman's alleged role in the Swiss fight for independence, but wasn't certain on its specifics. "I thought he was like a travelling circus, shooting apples for money," he admits. "It turns out [he's] a much bigger deal." In Hamm's film, Tell's dilemma comes about after he refuses to bend the knee to his country's Austrian overlords. As punishment, vicious viceroy Gessler (Connor Swindells) forces him to demonstrate his shooting prowess on son

Walter (Tobias Jowett): a brutal show of authority that Hamm describes as "terrorism in its purest form".

TAKE AIM

With crossbows outlawed in his native Denmark, Bang headed to the UK to learn how to master one. "It needed to be almost an extension of [Tell's] arm," he explains. "It's a tricky little weapon, so it was just a case of doing it over and over." At around 6' 3", Bang is a tall man and so his bow was made three inches longer than it would be normally. "He was dead-eye in training, spot on, and he wouldn't finish until he got a bull," says armourer Tommy Dunne. The weapon also presented a new, unique set of rules that Bang had to follow. "You can't say, 'Fire!' with a crossbow because there's no fire," he says. "So instead you say, 'Release.' Not that we release any live bolts in the movie. It's more about the handling of it, and looking like you bloody know what you're doing."

RELEASE

It's a humid day on the set, with biblical levels of flies plaguing the tunic-clad extras, Bang and Jowett, who is standing against a pole, apple on bonce. For Bang, the insects are a welcome addition. "Anything that makes it tactile and palpable is really helpful," he says. "It would



Top to bottom: William Tell (Claes Bang) takes aim; A long-shot of son Walter (Tobias Jowett); The target in close-up; Walter with the famed fruit atop his head.

have been weird to shoot this in a studio on a green screen and not have the physical feel of it." He strides 50 paces away from Jowett, turns and points his crossbow, ready to shoot the (to-be-added-later-via-CGI) projectile. "Bring the horses in!" yells Hamm. "Everyone get their pikes up!" The sun might be setting on medieval Altdorf, but there's still time for one last shot.

WILLIAM TELL IS IN CINEMAS FROM 17 JANUARY

THE MONTHLY MIXTAP

EMPIRE MIXMASTER
AMON WARMANN SELECTS
THIS MONTH'S
ESSENTIAL TUNES

'BEYOND' AULI'I CRAVALHO

MOANA 2

Moana questions but ultimately accepts her destiny to leave her home and venture into dangerous waters, in an anthem powered by rhythmic drums and Cravalho's soaring vocals.

'DAYBREAK' ROBIN CAROLAN

NOSFERATU

The rich stringwork here is by turns haunting and tragic from Carolan, who leans into the romanticism of Robert Eggers' gothic horror.

'ROCK DJ' ROBBIE WILLIAMS

BETTER MAN

A standout Piccadilly Circus-set dance sequence is soundtracked by Williams' chart-topping and enduringly catchy classic in this distinct chimp-fronted biopic.

'THE RIDER' PARIS PALOMA

THE LORD OF THE RINGS:

THE WAR OF THE ROHIRRIM

Iconic dialogue from King Théoden's pre-battle speech in *The Return Of The King* is referenced in this heartfelt song, and Paloma's stirring performance taps into the despair, courage and hope of Rohan's bravest warriors.

'OPENING' BRYCE DESSNER

WE LIVE IN TIME

Dessner opts for tasteful simplicity with his score, and a delicate guitar and piano proves to be the perfect, poignant combo for this intimate, unconventional romance about a couple's triumphs and troubles.

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FIRST WORD



HOW A MILITIA MOVIE TOOK ON NEW MEANING

JUSTIN KURZEL ON MAKING THE ORDER, A CRIME THRILLER ROOTED IN NEO-NAZI REALISM

WITH THE FAR-RIGHT gaining more power globally day by day, Justin Kurzel's *The Order* — an '80s-set thriller which explores the murky world of white supremacists — has taken on a whole new dimension since the Australian filmmaker signed on in late 2020.

"Since shooting it, the conversation around the film has sharpened with where we are now," he says. "It no longer feels like a period film and feels like something that could be bubbling away today — unfortunately."

Inspired by true-life events, *The Order* follows FBI agent Terry Husk (Jude Law, playing a fictionalised lawman) on the hunt for cult leader Bob Mathews (Nicholas Hoult), who has formed a neo-Nazi group called The Order, dedicated to overthrowing the US government by any means necessary.

Key to *The Order*'s mission is a real-life racist, anti-Semitic 1978 novel called *The Turner Diaries* that Kurzel describes as "written like a Choose Your Own Adventure book, then when you really get into it, it outlines 12 steps to take down [a] government". Kurzel joined the project a month before the storming of the Capitol on 6 January 2021, where the book was cited as a prime playbook in the insurrection. Kurzel's "heist" film suddenly took on a whole new currency.

"There was this devastating picture in the news of these hanging nooses that to me looked like references to one of the chapters in *The Turner Diaries* where Congressmen and women were going to be hung outside the Capitol building," he recalls. "It was so disturbing."

Playing into the film's contemporaneity, Kurzel didn't want



Top to bottom: Agent Terry Husk (Jude Law) is on the hunt; Bob Mathews (Nicholas Hoult) rises up; Director Justin Kurzel with Law on set.

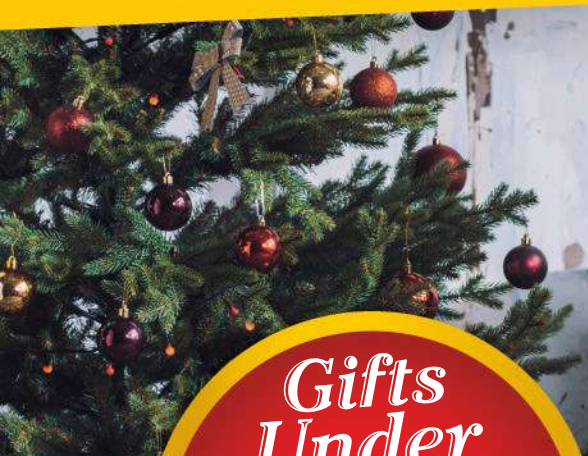
to reduce Mathews to a one-note baddie. He cast Nicholas Hoult, a collaborator on Kurzel's *True History Of The Kelly Gang*, because of a quality Mathews, by all accounts, had in spades — charisma. "Nick's got a real cool," says Kurzel. "He's incredibly engaging and you get seduced by his personality instantly. We didn't want to play Mathews as an arch villain."

For Kurzel, the film is having the desired effect of provoking a lot of debate. "That's what I was hoping for," he says. "I'm quite astonished how few people knew about this story, especially in America." Sadly, it feels like a discourse that won't be resolved any time soon. IAN FREER

THE ORDER IS IN CINEMAS FROM 26 DECEMBER

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How Much Is A Pint Of Milk?

Billy Eichner

THE MUFASA STAR AND COMEDIAN TRADES THE STREET FOR OUR STIMULATING QUIZ

WORDS OLLY RICHARDS



When in your life were you most starstruck?

Doing *Billy On The Street*, I've met a lot of famous people. I was very starstruck by Michelle Obama, who came on when she was still First Lady. We shot a segment with her in conjunction with *Sesame Street*, so to make it even more surreal, Big Bird was also there. I've never been more nervous shooting *Billy On The Street* in my life. Of course, she was super-casual and down-to-earth and game for anything. And Big Bird is the only guest who was ever taller than me.

Do you have a nickname?

My best friend to this day is the same best friend I had in high school. His name is Heath. At this point we have dozens of little nicknames for each other and even if I explain them they will make no sense to you. He's going to die that I've told you this. I call him 'Chicken B1'. He calls me 'Chicken B2'. That started so long ago that I don't even know where it came from.

How much is a pint of milk?

I don't know. I'm going to say 50 pence?

Which movie have you seen more than any other?

There are a few. *Pretty Woman*. *Dirty Dancing*. Then there are those that I watched over and over as a kid and probably inspired me in a lot of ways. *Spaceballs*. *iThree Amigos!* — pretty much anything with Steve Martin and Martin

Short. And a Chevy Chase film called *Funny Farm* that I watched a million times.

What would be your dream job if you weren't an actor?

Can I be super-cheesy and say that I'm *doing* the thing I most want to do? No? Fine. I would love to teach. I would teach drama or theatre to younger people. Not that I'm such an expert, but I think that would be fun and creatively fulfilling. Oh, I could be a tour guide of New York City because I love it. I am equipped to do that. I probably actually shouldn't be teaching acting, but I could be a really, really strong tour guide.

What's your most irrational fear?

I have *many*. I feel very strongly that I should not ever be behind the wheel of a car, because I believe I would hurt myself and others. I do not own a car or even have a licence. A lot of people give me a hard time about this, especially in LA, but I know I'm doing the public a favour by refusing to drive. I am also scared to light a match. I don't like fire. I'm afraid I'll somehow set my curtains alight.

What's the best advice you've ever been given?

Back in 2009, when I was a struggling actor/comedian/writer in New York, I had a couple of brushes with potential success. I was in my thirties and it didn't feel cute anymore to be struggling. I didn't know how much longer,

emotionally or financially, I could keep going to try to make my dream come true. Then I found a bit of a mentor in Joan Rivers. We had done a pilot together, which didn't get picked up. I went to her for advice and she told me I had enough talent to stick with it, she thought I was going to make it, and that I just needed to hold on a little longer. Because of that I did, and not long after that I got on TV. If someone as blunt and honest as Joan Rivers is telling you to stick with it, you do.

What is the worst smell in the world?

Well, in New York it's garbage. But I'll tell you, what I hate almost as much is someone wearing too much perfume in an elevator. You'll walk into an elevator in New York or LA and the perfume in there will give you an immediate headache.

What is the one thing you do better than anyone else you know?

I'm really good at giving advice. I think I'm honest and self-aware and I think I'm good at helping my friends take a bird's-eye view of things, even though I have a hard time doing that for myself. It's much easier with other people.

When were you last naked outdoors?

I'm usually naked while giving people the advice.

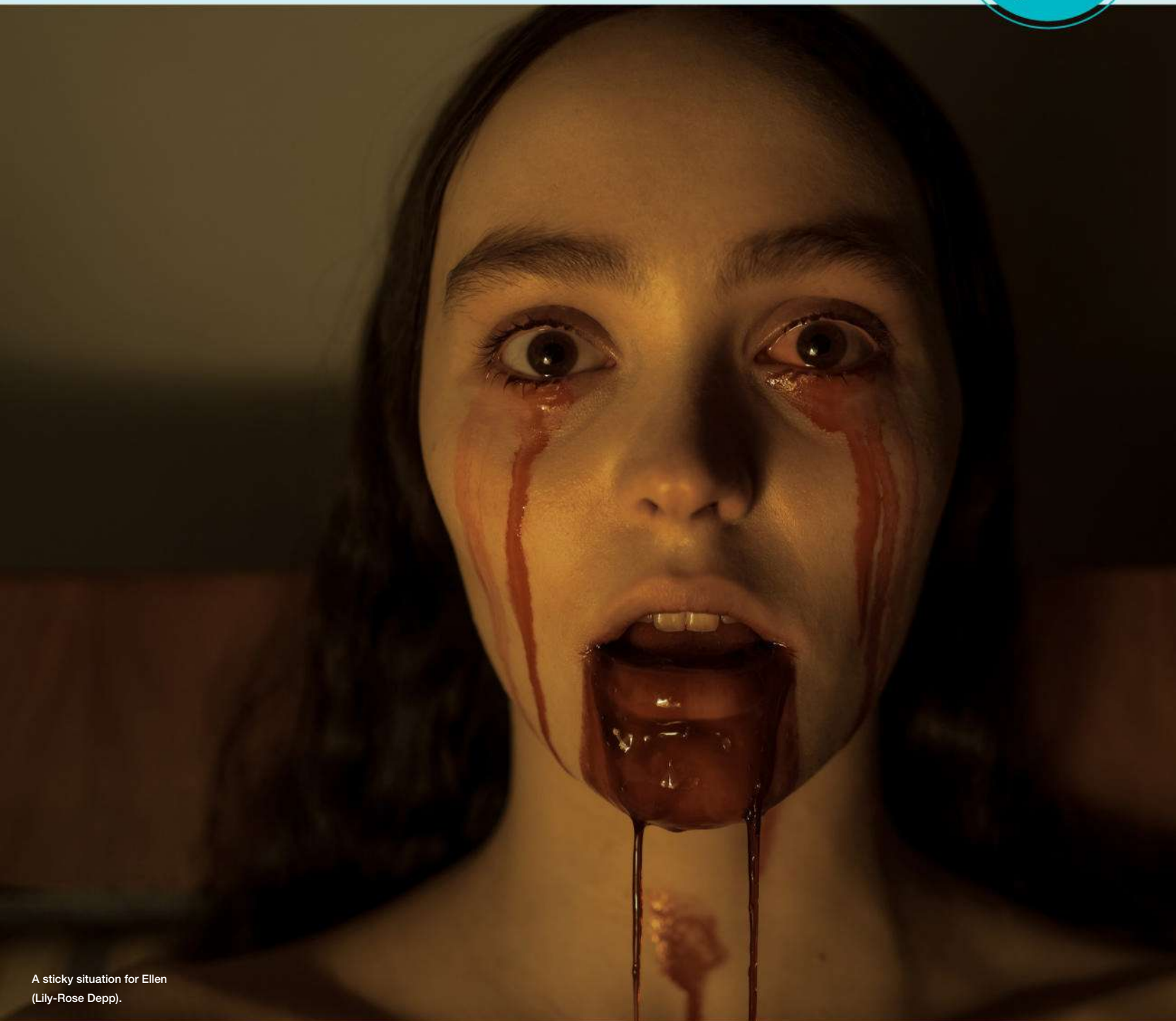


MUFASA: THE LION KING IS IN CINEMAS FROM 20 DECEMBER

reviews

FILMS, TV, BOOKS, GAMES — ALL THE BIG RELEASES, RATED

19 DECEMBER 2024 — 15 JANUARY 2025 | EDITED BY JOHN NUGENT



A sticky situation for Ellen
(Lily-Rose Depp).



Top to bottom:
Shadow play:
Nicholas Hoult
as Thomas
Hutter; Naked
terror; Willem
Dafoe's
Professor Albin
Eberhart von
Franz makes
his point.

WATCH FIRST

As well as the
original 1922
Nosferatu, Robert
Eggers has cited
classic Universal
horrors
of the 1930s
— *Dracula*,
Frankenstein, *The
Mummy* and *Bride
Of Frankenstein*
— as inspirations.

FILM

NOSFERATU

ROBERT EGGERS GOES FOR
THE JUGULAR

★★★★

OUT 1 JANUARY / CERT 15 / 132 MINS

DIRECTOR Robert Eggers

CAST Bill Skarsgård, Lily-Rose Depp, Nicholas Hoult, Aaron Taylor-Johnson, Willem Dafoe, Emma Corrin, Ralph Ineson

PLOT The blood-sucking vampire Count Orlok (Skarsgård) moves from Transylvania to the German city of Wisborg. There, infatuation with Ellen (Depp) consumes him, as his deathly influence consumes others...

"COME TO ME, hear my call," murmurs Ellen Hutter (Lily-Rose Depp) in Robert Eggers' full-blown Gothic melodrama *Nosferatu*. She's speaking not to her husband Thomas (Nicholas Hoult), a young estate agent who's journeying to the jagged, windswept Carpathians on business, but to his undead client Count Orlok (Bill Skarsgård), whose sulphurous powers have scrawled his signature upon her heart and soul as clearly as he scribbles his John Hancock on the property deeds for a new home in Wisborg, Northern Germany.

Come to me. Eggers is here obeying a similar call. Enraptured by F.W. Murnau's 1922 masterpiece *Nosferatu: A Symphony Of Horror* since eyeing it, aged nine, on VHS, he mounted a stage play in high school and has been yearning to fashion a big-screen version since 2015. It is, you might say, the film he was born to (re)make, for the talon-prints of Murnau's spectral frightshow are evident on Eggers' first three period films, *The Witch*, *The Lighthouse* and *The Northman*. Okay, so the writer/director's love of ornate, archaic language — again present in *Nosferatu*, which often plays as a verbose chamber piece in which characters speak RP, Hammer-Horror-style English — might not chime with a silent picture, but Murnau's influence is present in Eggers' world-building, his conjuring of tangible atmospheres and his keen sense of the uncanny. Here, it's apparent not just in the largely faithful retelling of the story, which Murnau's scribe, Henrik Galeen, cribbed from Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, but in the creeping camera that captures haunting images so desaturated as to appear monochrome by moonlight.

As you'd expect of a modern-day take (even one that retains the 1830s setting), the character of Ellen is brought to the foreground. Werner Herzog did the same for Lucy in his sorrowful 1979 version, *Nosferatu The Vampyre*, but

Ellen's granted more psychological depth. With hubby Thomas occupying the traditional 'damsel-in-distress' role, and fellow vampire-hunters Friedrich Harding (Aaron Taylor-Johnson) and Van Helsing-figure Professor Albin Eberhart Von Franz (a scene-stealing Willem Dafoe) proving ineffectual, it's Ellen who must wrestle control. "Control" being the operative word: Orlok's obsession is toxic, and while he might have crossed oceans of time to find Ellen, there's little of the romance that existed between Gary Oldman's *Dracula* and Winona Ryder's Mina in Francis Ford Coppola's 1992 movie, *Bram Stoker's Dracula*.

Skarsgård excels in the title role. Seemingly the go-to guy for horror icons, having brought It as Pennywise the Dancing Clown, he's here dropped weight and an octave in his vocal delivery. He is, in fact, unrecognisable — before you even consider a rather distracting moustache — and summons a force that is genuinely frightening. That you will believe this monster can ravage a city is some feat given his skeletal frame and bent gait that nod to, but wisely never copy, Max Schreck's indelible appearance in the Murnau movie. (Similarly, Eggers and regular cinematographer Jarin Blaschke consistently perform shadow plays on the walls of the exemplary sets while never directly mimicking the iconic shots of the OG movie.) *Nosferatu's* key intention, it seems, is to rescue the vampire from its twinkly tween era and to return it to its folkloric roots, when mouldering corpses were exhumed and torched to divest them of power. Boy, does it succeed.

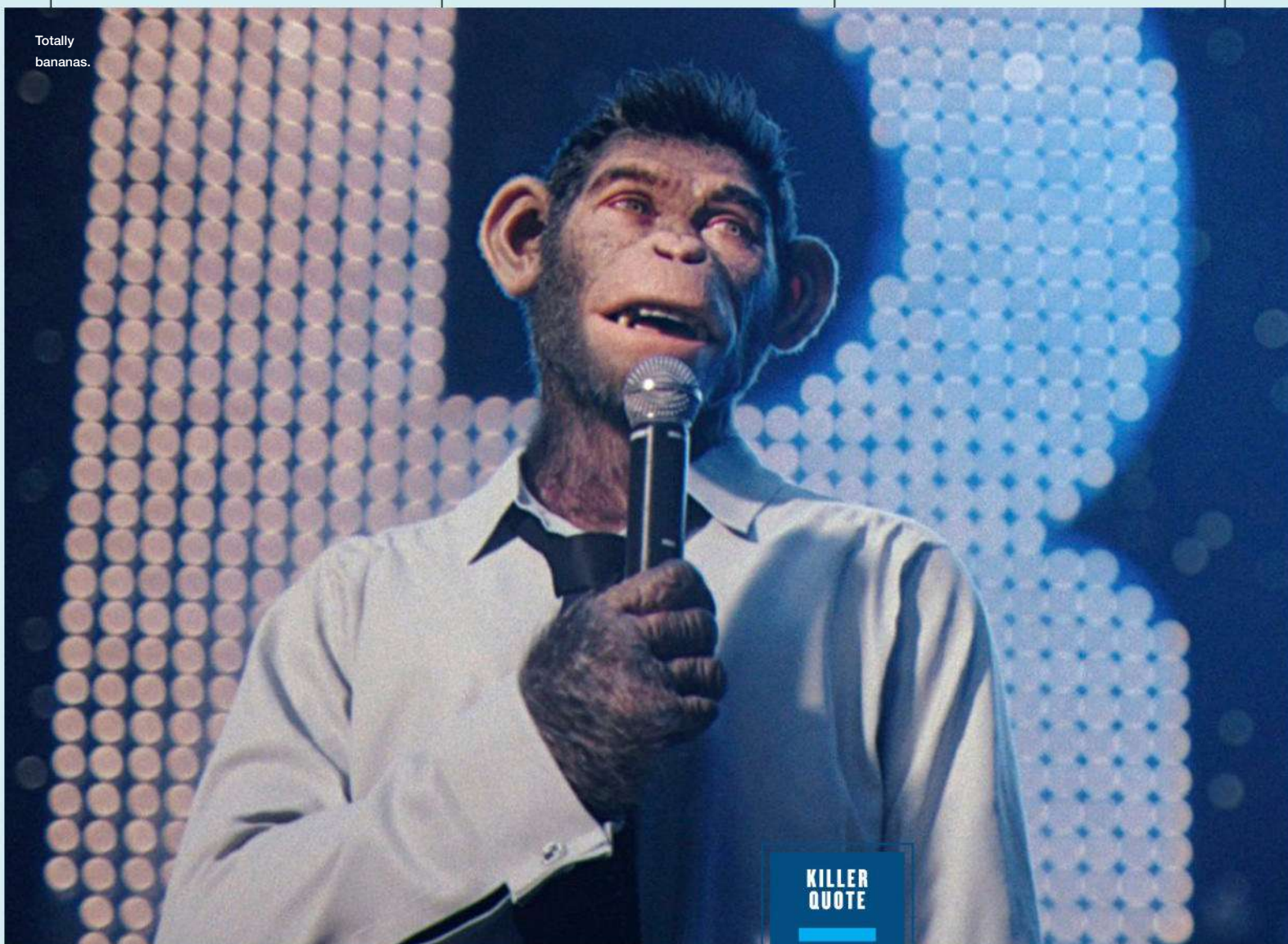
Whether it continues the horror genre's current boom at the box office is another matter. "Merchant Ivory does Hammer Horror" was Eggers' pitch, and *Nosferatu's* careful pacing, dialogue-heavy interior scenes and elegant visuals inspired by Romantic paintings and the work of Freddie Francis (*The Innocents*, *Dracula Has Risen From The Grave*) might hold some at a distance even as it pulls in others. There's also no getting around this story having been done to death, meaning there's an element of 'now it's the bit at the castle', 'now it's the bit on the boat'... But who else working today could deliver each scene with such conviction?

Like Murnau, Eggers has made a timely film about the spread of corruption and decay, and there's an eerie peculiarity to both of these plague-infested movies arriving soon after a pandemic (Spanish flu, Covid). Will this *Nosferatu* also mirror the first by surviving for decades to come? Time will tell but, right now, you'd do well to invite it in. Come to me...

JAMIE GRAHAM

VERDICT Despite its familiar story beats, Eggers' retelling suffocates like a coffin, right up to its chilling final shot. Lily-Rose Depp is full-bloodedly committed, and Bill Skarsgård's fiend gorges with terrible fury.

Totally
bananas.



KILLER QUOTE

"Gary sang like an
angel, but he
danced like a twat."

ROBBIE
WILLIAMS

FILM

BETTER MAN

LET ROBBIE-WILLIAMS-AS-A-CHIMP
ENTERTAIN YOU

★★★★★

OUT 26 DECEMBER / CERT 15 / 134 MINS

DIRECTOR Michael Gracey

CAST Jonno Davies, Robbie Williams, Steve Pemberton, Alison Steadman, Damon Herriman, Raechelle Banno

PLOT Coming from humble beginnings, Robbie Williams (Davies) — in CG chimp form — finds fame as a pop star and wrestles with his demons.

WE'RE JUST A few minutes into *Better Man* when the eight-year-old Robert Williams — very much played by a CG chimp — is abandoned by his father. Williams steps out onto the streets of Stoke-on-Trent singing 'Feel', a song by the pop star he will later become. And despite none of that making sense on paper, your heart shatters. His shoulders slump and his green, glassy, watery eyes plead for protection as the

strings swell. "I just wanna feel real love, feel the home that I live in," he sings. It's hard *not* to love him.

The story is told from Williams' perspective, and it's a carnival of self-loathing. Yes, this is a full-blown musical extravaganza from the director of *The Greatest Showman*, bubbling with sweeping grandeur, but there's not a second that doesn't feel like some deep truth is being expunged. Having told Michael Gracey that, during his time with Take That, Williams often felt like he was being dragged onto the stage to perform like a monkey, Gracey takes that image and runs with it. It's a huge risk, but not only does it pay off, it elevates everything we see on screen, making it all both heightened *and*, somehow, more relatable.

Via performance-capture, Jonno Davies mimics Williams' mannerisms to a tee, while Wētā FX layers its digital monkey-magic on top of it all (Davies provides Williams' speaking voice; Williams himself does the singing). You feel protective of him, cautious of him, this proto-human running on pure instinct, this confused chimp lashing out in the limelight, sometimes frightened, sometimes feral.

The chimp, though, is *so* effective that a couple of supporting characters suffer in comparison. A strand involving Williams' best

friend feels like it's barely survived the cutting-room floor. More problematic is Williams' dad, Peter: Steve Pemberton does good work playing up the man's panto showmanship, but as far as this film's concerned, that's all there is to him. Painted in broad strokes, he's just nowhere near as, well, human as the chimp is. Considering that Williams' relationship with him is the big throughline, it's a bit of a setback, but it hits home nonetheless, sweet and sad as it is.

Despite its darkness, this is a cheeky film, consistently undercutting itself, taking the piss, upending expectations. Even with familiar beats — the rise to fame, the dreaded comedown, the life-threatening addictions — it never feels rote, fully swerving the curse of *Walk Hard*, leaving other music biopics for dust. And from start to finish beats that huge heart. There is great tenderness and sensitivity here. And a bleach-blond chimp in a red Adidas tracksuit. It's a heady concoction. **ALEX GODFREY**

VERDICT The most batshit music biopic since Todd Haynes did the Karen Carpenter story with Barbie dolls, Michael Gracey pulls off the biggest cinematic surprise of the year. An absolute blast.



A REAL PAIN

★★★★

OUT 8 JANUARY / CERT 15 / 89 MINS

DIRECTOR Jesse Eisenberg

CAST Jesse Eisenberg, Kieran Culkin, Will Sharpe, Jennifer Grey

A Real Pain is a sublime version of that often mishandled genre: the mismatched-buddy comedy. Jesse Eisenberg's second film as a writer-director pitches two American Jewish cousins, nervy David (Eisenberg) and extrovert Benji (Kieran Culkin) on a tour of Poland to pay respects to their recently passed beloved grandmother, a Holocaust survivor. It's by turns funny and emotional as the trip invokes some deep-seated familial tensions against the backdrop of the biggest trauma in European history, the film offering a tender treatise on different conceptions of pain. It's small in scale but Eisenberg walks the tonal tightrope expertly, gets great performances from his cast, and forms a double act with a livewire Culkin that rings touching and true. **IF**



HOT FROSTY

★★

OUT NOW (NETFLIX) / CERT PG / 92 MINS

DIRECTOR Jerry Ciccoritti

CAST Lacey Chabert, Dustin Milligan, Craig Robinson, Joe Lo Truglio

Netflix's latest piece of hunky Christmas junk will only rise above your expectations if you keep them well below freezing. When kindly café owner Kathy (Lacey Chabert) donates a scarf to an ice sculpture, it comes to life as a hunky man (Dustin Milligan). Before you can say, "Is that a carrot in your pocket or are you just pleased to see me?", he's encouraging her to open her heart, doing topless DIY and winning over the entire town in a story more predictable than the sunrise. This is cynically greenlit, built on a certainty that some people will watch any festive film with a silly enough premise in pursuit of some mindless seasonal cheer. It could have been worse, but chances are it will still leave you cold. **HOH**



Héra (Gaia Wise) brings the fight to Wulf (Luke Pasqualino).

FILM

THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE WAR OF THE ROHIRRIM

RIDERS OF ROHAN, NOW IS THE HOUR!

★★★★

OUT NOW / CERT 12A / 134 MINS

DIRECTOR Kenji Kamiyama

CAST Brian Cox, Gaia Wise, Luke Pasqualino, Miranda Otto, Lorraine Ashbourne, Yazdan Qafouri, Benjamin Wainwright

PLOT In Rohan, mighty king Helm Hammerhand (Cox) wars with bitter rival Wulf (Pasqualino). Helm's headstrong daughter Héra (Wise) must save their people.

"ALL MIDDLE-EARTH knows the tale of the War Of The Ring," moodily intones Miranda Otto's Cate Blanchett-esque voiceover at the beginning of *The War Of The Rohirrim*. But the story of Helm Hammerhand and his daughter Héra, we are told, is "not a song you will have heard sung". That's partly because it's a tale plucked from the depths of J.R.R. Tolkien's appendices, set two centuries before Frodo was even a twinkle in Sauron's Great Eye. It is almost literally a footnote, a feeling this spin-off film sometimes struggles to shake off — despite some impressive work.

Directed by Japanese anime master Kenji Kamiyama, this is the first Middle-earth feature-length film in a decade, and the first major animated outing for the series since Ralph Bakshi's psychedelic 1978 adaptation. It's an interesting match-up of people behind the camera — an odd fellowship of strangers from distant lands, as Elrond might put it. But the results can feel jarring. Kamiyama is clearly using Jackson's film as a visual template — familiar locations such as

Edoras, Isengard and the soon-to-be-dubbed Helm's Deep swear obvious fealty to Jackson's palette, and there are some gorgeous painterly backgrounds mimicking New Zealand's mountainous grandeur. Anime interpretations of Western properties have a generally solid track-record (*The Animatrix*, *Terminator Zero*), but Kamiyama, an anime veteran of four decades, takes a somewhat old-fashioned, low frame-rate approach, mixing his traditional 2D style with some awkward 3D environments. (There are more swooping, spinning cameras here than in a Michael Bay film.)

With no Elves, no Dwarves, and no Hobbits in sight, there's a danger of this feeling less, well, *Lord-Of-The-Rings-y* than it could, or should. The story, of warring horsemen and rival houses, a great battle followed by a great siege, seems influenced by Shakespeare or *Game Of Thrones*, but feels less consequential than the Middle-earth yarns we're used to (despite a slightly tenuous attempt to weave rings into the tale).

What rescues this from feeling like a footnote are *Rohirrim*'s set-pieces. Anime's greatest strengths lie in action, and the battle scenes feel muscular, energetic and eye-popping. (Like Samwise, you too will marvel at the Oliphaunts.) Helm Hammerhand (a full-throated Brian Cox) is a gargantuan, Viking-like leader, fiery and impetuous, and he earns a couple of instantly iconic moments which feel legendary and myth-making. Helm's Deep, yes, but Helm's thicc, too.

But this is really the story of Héra (Gaia Wise), in a narrative about bloodlines and female strength. It wears those themes lightly but thoughtfully — the aural presence of Otto's Éowyn nods to a patriarchy being challenged — all wrapped up in very Tolkienesque ideas about leadership from uncommon places. There are morsels of Middle-earth magic here. And when Stephen Gallagher's score liberally borrows from Howard Shore's 'Riders Of Rohan' theme, few spines will go un-tingled. **JOHN NUGENT**

VERDICT This is something of an unexpected journey for Middle-earth on screen. It never scrapes the heights of Jackson's trilogy — few do — but amid a messy meeting of worlds, there are stirring moments.

Prima donna: Angelina Jolie as Maria Callas.



FILM

MARIA

ANGELINA RETURNS TO THE SCREEN
— AND TO THE OSCARS RACE



OUT 10 JANUARY / CERT TBC / 124 MINS

DIRECTOR Pablo Larraín

CAST Angelina Jolie, Pierfrancesco Favino, Alba Rohrwacher, Haluk Bilginer, Kodi Smit-McPhee, Stephen Ashfield

PLOT 1977. Famed opera singer Maria Callas (Jolie) lives quietly in her Paris apartment, mulling over a comeback. But her poor health — and her past — haunts her.

THERE ARE EFFECTIVELY three stories being told in *Maria*. The first is the surface-level plot, the life of Maria Callas, told through that life's final few days: the legendarily charismatic American-born Greek singer who beguiled the opera world with her exceptional voice and her dramatic private life, a foundational myth of the definitional diva. It is also the story of Pablo

Larraín, the Chilean filmmaker who has become obsessed with making sumptuous, psychologically rich period biopics about regal 20th century women (*Jackie*, *Spencer*), and seems to be slowly building his own unique subgenre. The third and perhaps most compelling story is that of Angelina Jolie, in the title role, taking her first acting gig in three years, and her first leading dramatic role in over a decade. Her very presence here is a story in itself.

As Maria Callas, Jolie is staggeringly good. Perhaps the best she's ever been. From the off, she is a riveting, commanding presence: delicate and devastating, her small frame dominating a large room, even as her loyal live-in staff worry about her weight loss. Jolie adopts a mid-century, mid-Atlantic accent, with which to deliver some witty, sharp-tongued dialogue gifted from Steven Knight's insightful script. Depicted here, Maria is a diva above all others, the Platonic ideal. "Book me a table at a café where the waiters know who I am," Callas demands at one point. "I'm in the mood for adulation."

It is, as much as anything else, a study of performance and fame, of how addictive and intoxicating it can be, a rich blessing and a terrible curse. Which is why it is so fascinating that Jolie herself has taken the role: this film is something of a comeback for her, having taken

a deliberate break from acting after some difficult years in her personal life; her character in the film is also mulling a return to the glare of the spotlight. The parallels invite themselves. What is behind the need, the hunger for that glare, even when it punishes more than rewards? What happens when your own iconography threatens to overshadow the human inside? "I took liberties all my life," Callas archly observes at one point, "and the world took liberties with me."

Some Callas-connoisseurs might quibble with the nuances of Jolie's take, which by all accounts is less of a direct impersonation than something seeking the 'spirit' of Callas. She certainly makes for a convincing soprano; during the singing scenes, which apparently use a clever blend of both Callas and Jolie's voices, it is never quite clear where the seams are. The easy temptation with a story like this would be to go big and, well, operatic, and there are certainly some sporadic, dazzlingly surreal hallucinations that feel plucked from a production at Teatro alla Scala — but on the whole this is a muted, autumnal affair, matching Maria's mood. Unlike the wacky black-and-white horror-comedy stylings of his last film, *El Conde* (which depicted the Chilean dictator

KILLER QUOTE

"You're Maria Callas. You're not late. Everyone else is early."

JEFFREY TATE
(STEPHEN ASHFIELD)



Top to bottom: JFK (Caspar Phillipson) chats to Aristotle Onassis (Haluk Bilginer); TV presenter Mandrax (Kodi Smit-McPhee); Callas enjoys some downtime.

Augusto Pinochet as a literal vampire), Larraín takes an understated approach, wisely getting out the way of his leading lady where possible.

Only occasionally does the film fall into biopic pitfalls. Kodi Smit-McPhee plays a television interviewer who appears to be a figment of Callas' imagination, or a series of hallucinations — a device which conveniently takes us through the key events of her life. That includes a grisly moment in 1940 when she is forced to perform for Nazi officers during World War II — shout-out to Aggelina Papadopoulou for the tricky job of portraying a young Callas, despite little resemblance to Jolie — scenes that feel more forced and box-tick-y than the main 1977 narrative.

Any time that Larraín pulls away from Jolie, in fact, the film feels like it slightly loses its focus. There is perhaps too much emphasis on her ex-husband, the Greek billionaire Aristotle Onassis (Haluk Bilginer) — even if it does offer the tantalising prospect of a shared Larraín Biopic Universe (Onassis also married Jackie Kennedy, a previous fixation of the director).

What continuously both grounds and elevates the film is Jolie, her humanity, sensitivity and loneliness aching through the screen. She deserves to take home an armful of awards, and it would be a fitting end to this chapter of her story. But more than that kind of recognition, she deserves to be acknowledged as a kindred spirit to Callas: they are, this film confirms, two extraordinary women, whose fame shaped them, and in turn shaped their fame. **JOHN NUGENT**

VERDICT *La Diva Eterna* lives in Jolie, with a performance as towering as it is understated: sad and soulful and heartbreaking. She has never been better. **Brava!**



Getting closer: Tobias (Andrew Garfield) and Almut (Florence Pugh).
Below: And then they were three.

FILM

WE LIVE IN TIME

FEATURING SPECIAL GUEST
APPEARANCE: A CAROUSEL HORSE

★★★★

OUT 1 JANUARY / CERT 15 / 108 MINS

DIRECTOR John Crowley

CAST Andrew Garfield, Florence Pugh, Adam James, Marama Corlett, Aoife Hinds, Nikhil Parmar, Heather Craney

PLOT A chance encounter between chef Almut (Pugh) and recently divorced Tobias (Garfield) leads to romance — but a cancer diagnosis threatens their time together.

TIME MAY BE a straight line, but memories hit you in random waves. Taken in that spirit, *We Live In Time's* central gambit — to tell its love story out of chronological order — is more than just a stylistic flourish, the kind that would make Christopher Nolan proud. It's an inspired choice that adds a layer of unpredictability to John Crowley's weepy romcom. And thanks to a couple of powerhouse performances, its straightforward story packs a punch.

We're a good 15 minutes into *We Live In Time* when we get the meet-cute between our winning couple, which sees acclaimed chef Almut (Florence Pugh) accidentally hit Weetabix middle-manager Tobias (Andrew Garfield) with her car. By then, we've already seen them mull over a second cancer diagnosis, as well as enjoy a lighthearted moment with Almut in the throes of pregnancy. We continue to jump back and forth in time, but we never lose our bearings. As the highs and lows of the relationship unfold and Crowley doles out happiness and despair in equal measure, it's all fairly easy to follow, with Almut's varying hairstyles, the size of her pregnant belly, or the presence of the couple's daughter acting as helpful signposts.

More important than the when is the what. Nick Payne's screenplay delves into a myriad of



relationship issues that are rich in their complications, from decision-making over having children, to living for the future versus living for the now, and more. The film is at its best when it marinates in those difficult conversations, its non-judgement of its characters allowing for decisions and moments that are as selfish as they are honest, real, and human.

All of this is elevated several levels by two of the best actors working today. Garfield — here reuniting with Crowley, his director on *Boy A* — is brilliant as the exceedingly average Tobias, equally adept at showcasing lighthearted humour and devastating, soul-crushing pain. But this is Pugh's show, and she's riveting and quietly moving as her Almut strives for career glory even while coming to terms with her mortality. Together, Pugh and Garfield are a force. With chemistry in abundance, their courtship is sweet, funny and awkward, each non-verbal communication of longing, sadness and hurt deeply felt. They're easy to fall in love with.

The further we get into the story, the more the notion of legacy starts to rear its head. In one crucial scene, a frustrated Almut "doesn't want to be remembered as somebody's dead mum". It's a sequence that's strikingly, devastatingly truthful. But it's also a gateway to the film's ultimate message — the small moments matter just as much, if not more so, than the grand gestures and big accomplishments. As rendered in *We Live In Time's* bookends, it's a takeaway that's especially profound. **AMON WARMANN**

VERDICT Pugh and Garfield are a dynamite duo in this likably earnest, satisfyingly complicated love story. Worthy of your time, and your tears.

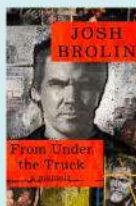
BOOKS

FROM UNDER THE TRUCK

A BROLIN STONE GATHERS NO MOSS



AUTHOR JOSH BROLIN



THERE'S A TRIED-and-true formula to the movie-star memoir. You get some chapters about humble beginnings, a slow rise to fame, then tales of on-set triumphs and giddy nights at the Oscars, all coated in a sheen of carefully calibrated modesty and gratitude. Well, Josh Brolin clearly didn't get the handbook.

Under The Truck, the Californian actor's account of his turbulent life, is nothing if not unsanitised. It opens with a passage about his unruly, hard-drinking mother (whom we later learn gave her children wild mountain lions and timber wolves as playmates), which swiftly turns into Brolin masturbating in a motel room ("push two pillows together: instant vagina"). This is a book that clearly has not been within 100 yards of a Hollywood publicist.

Chapters are short and shard-of-glass sharp, jumping around chronologically in a way that's constantly surprising. In one passage, Brolin toggles between the sets of *The Goonies* (1985) and *No Country For Old Men* (2007), illuminating his different mindsets at those times. But anyone buying the book for insights into his performances will be disappointed. There's not a single mention of *Thanos*. His Oscar nomination for *Milk* is brushed over. Often big movies are mentioned only obliquely. We do, on the other



Firebrand: Josh Brolin lets rip in *No Country For Old Men*.

hand, get some hilariously uncomfortable encounters with celebrities, including Tommy Lee Jones, who has "overtly certain cowboy eyes", and Robert De Niro, who does not appreciate an inebriated Brolin telling him, in front of a squirming Sean Penn, "You got a fucking face."

Throughout, in fact, Brolin seems more interested in the dark days he's experienced — and he's experienced a lot, from his time in a tough surfer gang called the Cito Rats, to his days being hooked on heroin and then alcohol, to the day he got stabbed in the stomach by a stranger in Costa Rica — than his considerable professional success. It's a star grappling with his own past, rather than applauding it. And as the title of the book suggests, he relishes getting down into the dirt; *Under The Truck* is brutally

honest and filterless, with sections even on times he's fantasised about flight attendants and Italian waitresses. The writing is pulpy, poetic (there are actual poems here, too) and piss-takey, sometimes all at once. Listening to a drunk Joel Coen tell stories is, in Brolin's words, "like watching a good short film that goes on way too long".

It won't be what everyone wants from this memoir, but what it is pure, uncut Josh Brolin. Like the life it describes, it's a ride.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

VERDICT A straight-from-the-heart, beautifully penned series of vignettes that lets you inside Brolin's fascinating, roiling brain. A traditional Hollywood tell-all it's not, but all the better for it.

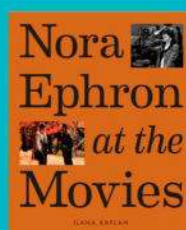


STAR WARS ENCYCLOPEDIA



EDITOR FRANKIE HALLAM

The latest update to DK's ultimate *Star Wars* guide makes for most impressive reading. Offering readers a comprehensive A(ldean) to Z(eb Orrelios) of all things a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, this lavishly presented coffee-table tome — whose 2,200-plus entries are handily laid out in user-friendly, timeline order — will doubtless prove a sacred text for die-hard fans. Yippee! JK



NORA EPHRON AT THE MOVIES



AUTHOR ILANA KAPLAN

The "fairy godmother of romantic comedies" earns a handsome coffee-table monograph from culture writer Ilana Kaplan. Accompanying the generously designed artwork is thoughtful analysis of Ephron's entire cinematic output, beginning with her famous romcom trilogy: *When Harry Met Sally*, *Sleepless In Seattle* and *You've Got Mail*, as well as deep dives on her lesser-known work, *Silkwood* and *Michael*. JN



ALFRED HITCHCOCK: ALL THE FILMS

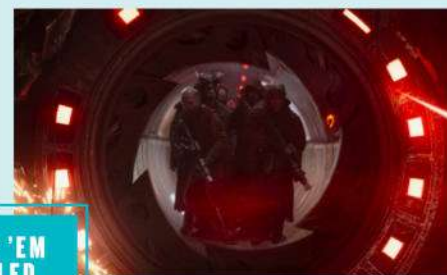


AUTHORS BERNARD BENOLIEL, GILLES ESPOSITO, JEAN-FRANÇOIS RAUGER, MURIELLE JOUDET

There's hardly a scarcity of books about the Master Of Suspense: only this year, there was *Alfred Hitchcock: Storyboards* and Neil Alcock's excellent *Hitchology*. This volume offers behind-the-scenes facts and analysis on every entry in Hitch's estimable filmography — a decent entry point for beginners, but those with shelves of Hitch-books might wish to save space. JN



Clockwise
from main: Jod Na Nawood (Jude Law) and crew; Space pirates in action; SM-33 (Nick Frost) — think Smee, but made of metal.



KEEP 'EM PEELED

In Episode 1, Fern and KB are hunting for power converters — the same fabled power converters Luke was planning to pick up from Tosche Station in *A New Hope*.



TV

SKELETON CREW

TRULY WONDERFUL, THE MIND OF A CHILD IS

★★★★

OUT NOW (DISNEY+) / EPISODES VIEWED 3 OF 8

SHOWRUNNERS Jon Watts, Christopher Ford
CAST Jude Law, Ravi Cabot-Conyers, Ryan Kiera Armstrong, Kyriana Kratter, Robert Timothy Smith, Nick Frost

PLOT On their sleepy home planet, four children discover a spaceship, which accidentally blasts them into hyperspace. Jod Na Nawood (Law) may be their only salvation.

IT'S A FUNNY old time for the galaxy far, far away. With the next *Star Wars* film not due for another year-and-a-half, and plans for others in continual flux, the focus — and pressure — falls on the small screen. And with the exception of *The Mandalorian* and *Andor*, the live-action TV shows have found mixed success. Enter *Skeleton Crew*, from *Spider-Man* director Jon Watts and

his longtime collaborator Christopher Ford — which places all that expectation and pressure on the shoulders of four small children.

Set initially in space-suburbia, *Skeleton Crew* introduces its young heroes in a manner familiar to all true *Star Wars* fans: playing with toys. Making a *Star Wars* show literally set in the suburbs feels like the subtext of *A New Hope* — Luke bored by the drudgery of Tatooine — made text. But this is still a very *Star Wars*-ian idea: a nobody looking out at the stars, dreaming of the bright centre of the universe. And it helps that the kids here are fun, sweet and immediately engaging: there's Wim (Ravi Cabot-Conyers), the rebellious explorer; Fern (Ryan Kiera Armstrong), the tough leader; Neel (Robert Timothy Smith), the elephantine scaredy-cat; and KB (Kyriana Kratter), the aloof nerd with a Geordi La Forge headset.

Wearing its 1980s influences on its snotty sleeves, Episode 1 plays out like *Stand By Me* — only instead of a dead body, the gang stumble upon a spaceship. Watts and his crack team of directors — including David Lowery and Bryce Dallas Howard — never forget their protagonists are not adults, and there is plenty of bickering, charming incompetence, and respect for the sacred rules of “claimsies”. This lot are all, it's fair

to say, a little short for a stormtrooper.

Yet there are sharper edges here, too. It's a show about kids, but its creators have asserted it's not necessarily a kids' show. Tonally, these first episodes don't entirely reconcile those poles; for one thing, given the presence of some unsavoury space-pirates, the body count ratchets up quicker than you can say yo-ho-ho and a bottle of Gamorrean Grog. Jude Law's slyly Force-sensitive Jod Na Nawood offers some solidly roguish intrigue, while Nick Frost plays one-eyed droid SM-33 with the zeal of Bob Hoskins in *Hook*.

This is a show which delights in its wretched hives of scum and villainy. There are pleasingly high levels of weird little furry guys in the Salacious B. Crumb/Babu Frik mould, too. It's all delightful, if not super-substantial. Three episodes in, there's not much more to *Skeleton Crew* than a fun, peppy wish-fulfilment space-adventure — but after the intensity of *Ahsoka* and *The Acolyte*, maybe that's all you need. **JOHN NUGENT**

VERDICT A fun entry in the *Star Wars* canon: light and frothy by design, driven by a sweet cast of younglings. After three episodes, it's still finding its footing, but there's promise.

GAMES

FEAR THE SPOTLIGHT

STAY IN THE SHADOWS WITH THIS AFFECTIONATE '90S HORROR TRIBUTE

★★★★★

PC, PS4/PS5, XBOX SERIES X|S

IN THE ERA of next-gen consoles and sparkly photo-real graphics, it's curiously refreshing when a game takes a deliberately retro approach. That's very much the case with *Fear The Spotlight*, a new indie horror from two-person development team Cozy Game Pals and the first toe-dip into video games from horror masters Blumhouse. Originally released on PC in 2023 — it now makes the leap to consoles with an additional chapter — this is a game which genuinely feels, graphics-wise at least, like it could have been made in 1996. For anyone who grew up on classic PS1 horrors like *Resident Evil* and *Silent Hill*, the experience is uncanny.

You play as Vivian (Khaya Fraites) and Amy (Maganda Marie), teenage friends — or more? — who break into their school at night to perform a seance with a stolen Ouija board. Wouldn't you know it: the séance does not go well. Vivian suddenly finds herself in the school as it was in 1991, just before a fire killed multiple students. As Vivian, you must track Amy down while escaping a deadly demonic spotlight.

For gamers of a certain vintage, there's plenty of nostalgia to be had here. The blocky, pixelated 3D character design evokes *Resident Evil*'s Jill Valentine; even the serif font used in the menus has echoes of that game's typeface. There are lovely retro touches everywhere, in fact: one mission involves plugging a red/



yellow/white RCA cable into an old telly — ask your parents, kids — while there are conspicuous references to '90s horrors like *Buffy* (the high school is named Sunnyside High, a clear nod to Sunnydale) and *The Ring*.

Appropriately for the teenage/young adult target audience, it's low-level spooky rather than heart-attack-inducingly scary. Aside from a couple of hammer-blow moments, the game prefers to luxuriate in unsettling imagery: a mannequin in a giant cage; a decapitated bird; a door that becomes locked without explanation; a scratchy old record playing of its own accord.

Some younger players, admittedly, might quibble with its old-fashioned, methodical pace. The gameplay here emphasises simple puzzles over violent action. But that straightforward

approach is hugely rewarding, backed up by a sweet queer love story with an emotional payoff. (There are echoes of the celebrated *The Last Of Us* DLC *Left Behind*, another teenage breaking-and-entering romance, which developer Bryan Singh previously worked on.) In parallel, conveniently placed notes and diary pages build up a tragic *Phantom Of The Opera*-esque backstory for the doomed 1991 students. It all makes for an atmospheric, emotionally rich experience. You can almost hear the PS1 startup sound. **JOHN NUGENT**

VERDICT This pleasingly throwback love letter to '90s horror is chock-full of engaging and evocative gameplay — with a queer narrative plucked straight from 2024.



DRAGON AGE: THE VEILGUARD

★★★★★

PC, PS4/PS5, XBOX SERIES X|S

Arriving a decade after *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, this high-fantasy follow-up retains and refines most of the defining elements of BioWare's beloved fantasy role-playing series. But while *The Veilguard* packs all the combat depth, rich, choice-driven storytelling and compelling companion arcs fans might expect, it also leans into a more accessible, streamlined style that favours cinematic panache over cerebral strategy. **MC**



S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2: HEART OF CHORNOBYL

★★★

PC, XBOX SERIES X|S

S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2 may look like *Fallout* sans kitsch, but spend time inside The Zone — a sci-fi-tinged, mutant-packed version of real-world Chernobyl — and you'll realise this is a masterclass in survival gameplay. Unfortunately, at launch it's too buggy to fully enjoy — understandable, as Ukrainian developer GSC Game World was displaced by the war with Russia — so players may want to wait for patches before diving in. **MK**



LIFE IS STRANGE: DOUBLE EXPOSURE

★★★★★

PC, PS4/PS5, XBOX SERIES X|S

Half chilled vibes, half *Twin Peaks* creepy, this direct sequel to 2015 franchise-starter *Life is Strange* sees time-twisting teen Max now able to open portals to an alternate timeline, using her new powers to try to stop the murder of her best pal. With witty dialogue, complex characters and gorgeous graphics (though it's a shame Max's notebook scribbles no longer look hand-drawn), it's a spooky treat right up to the *X-Men*-ish ending. **NDS**

A new angle: Nickel boys Elwood (Ethan Herisse) and Turner (Brandon Wilson).



FILM

NICKEL BOYS

A COLSON WHITEHEAD ADAPTATION THAT OFFERS A FRESH PERSPECTIVE



OUT 3 JANUARY / CERT 12A / 140 MINS

DIRECTOR RaMell Ross

CAST Ethan Herisse, Brandon Wilson, Hamish Linklater, Fred Hechinger, Daveed Diggs, Aunjanue Ellis-Taylor

PLOT In segregated 1960s Florida, young Elwood (Herisse) is wrongfully sent to the Nickel Academy reform school, an effective jail for African-Americans.

THERE MIGHT NOT be anything else like RaMell Ross' *Nickel Boys*. Adapting the 2019 novel by Colson Whitehead (best known to most for *The Underground Railroad*, adapted for TV by Barry Jenkins in 2021), Ross finds an unorthodox approach here: extrapolating the book's third-person narrative into a first-person point-of-view, the camera almost entirely presenting the action

as through the eyes of its protagonists. Think *Peep Show*, but as a serious and urgent drama.

It follows Elwood (Ethan Herisse), a young idealist living in Jim Crow-era Florida. Under false accusations, he's sent to the Nickel Academy for Boys, a "correction school" — in reality a prison by any other name, complete with the exploitation of its inmates as free labour. While there, Elwood befriends another young man named Turner (Brandon Wilson), who has a much more cynical outlook on freedom for African-Americans or any potential of escaping the school itself.

Through his distinctive first-person method, Ross — a photographer and documentarian, making his fictional feature debut here — isn't just playing with cinematic framing but also how such films frame the past. On some level it feels like a corrective to more sensationalised recreations of America's racist anti-Black history, seeking to empathise rather than observe. That might seem like a slight distinction, but you can feel it in *Nickel Boys*' revolutionary cinematography.

It takes a little bit of getting used to: after all, a head and a human eye doesn't quite move like a camera does. Leaning too hard into replicating that motion might prove a little disorientating. To the director's credit, Ross is not entirely strict with his experimental methods. Overall, the combined

approach feels as natural as a photographer's eye — framing the horrors of the Jim Crow era as it would have been observed by its victims. The camerawork becomes a way of illustrating a character's thoughts without narration, and with an immediacy that feels unprecedented.

It embodies a subjective perspective that so few films about Black lives have. In one heart-stopping moment, Elwood tentatively creeps around a corner, in fear of what he hears around it; the camera's limited point-of-view only adds to that innate paranoia. But it's also a unique and sensory approach to portraying memory, its associated sounds, textures and actions seen up close. Given Herisse and Wilson are only seen in reflections and glimpses, it's a technique that makes it difficult to evaluate the actual acting — but what we do see is revelatory in how Ross' camera plays with our perception of them, and how they respond. It's one of many ways in which *Nickel Boys* turns so many entrenched ideas about performance and perspective on their head.

KAMBOLE CAMPBELL

VERDICT *Nickel Boys* is a triumph. Its unique approach brings a new dimension to its source material, while amplifying the emotional resonance between the present and a horrifying past.

Magic: Cynthia Erivo as Elphaba. **Below left, top to bottom:** Ariana Grande as perky Glinda; Jeff Goldblum and Michelle Yeoh.



FILM

WICKED

DING DONG, THE WITCH IS ALIVE

★★★★

OUT NOW / CERT PG / 160 MINS

DIRECTOR John M. Chu

CAST Cynthia Erivo, Ariana Grande, Jonathan Bailey, Ethan Slater, Bowen Yang, Peter Dinklage, Michelle Yeoh, Jeff Goldblum

PLOT The early story of Oz's future Wicked Witch Of The West, Elphaba (Erivo), and her perky college roommate, Glinda (Grande).

IT'S NEVER EASY to adapt a deeply loved story. The musical of *Wicked*, based on Gregory Maguire's prequel novel to *The Wizard Of Oz*, has bred the sort of fandom that has strong feelings about particular trills in the original cast recording, but a film version must reach new audiences and win over the musical-resistant. Full marks for bravery, then, to director Jon M. Chu and stars Cynthia Erivo and Ariana Grande, who not only fill these big, ruby slippers but tap-tap

gaily away in them.

Chu uses every bell and whistle possible to turn the stage show into a movie epic. He takes the classic MGM Oz as his starting point, with gigantic sets and a massive cast of dancers. Then he adds VFX flourishes: talking animals, levitating courtyards and flying monkeys. The artificial glow of such heavy effects-work is largely an asset, contributing to the otherworldly air of Oz, even if none of it ever feels remotely real.

His best decision, however, was his casting. Cynthia Erivo is defiant as the devastatingly misunderstood Elphaba, channelling vulnerability and strength in a layered, complex role. Chu knows what he has, leaving the camera locked close on Erivo's face and letting her do the emotional heavy lifting as a woman bullied for her skin colour but holding true to her beliefs. Impressively, Ariana Grande more than holds her own against that towering performance. Her Glinda is self-centred and monstrously entitled, but she is not quite *bad*. Grande shows that Glinda's much-trumpeted image as a 'nice' person is the seed from which real goodness could grow, with Elphaba's inspiration. She, in turn, helps foster Elphaba's confidence and courage. And while it may seem superfluous to say, both are astonishingly gifted singers, not only in terms of pure voice, but in their vocal control

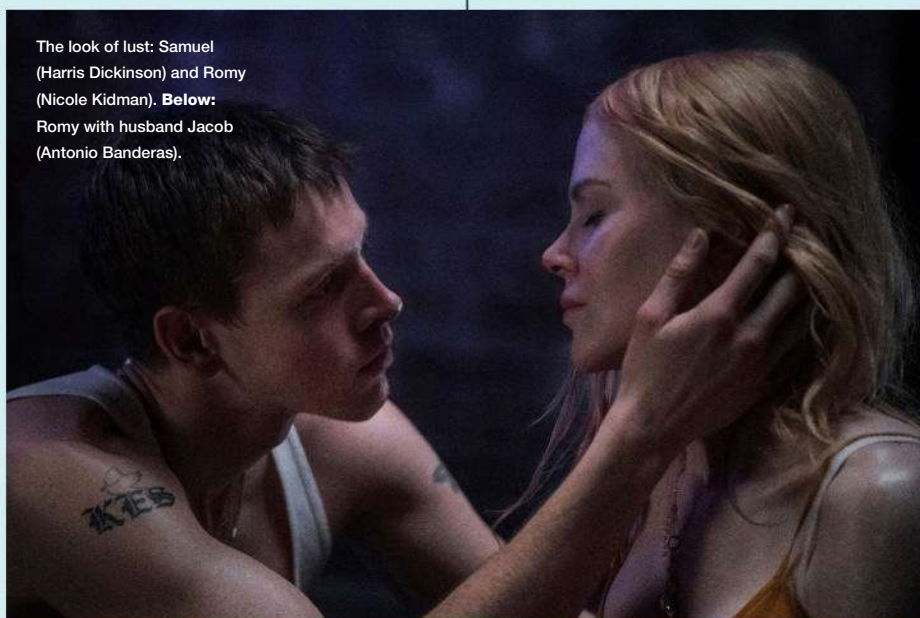
and characterisation.

The supporting cast are solid but less well served, with Michelle Yeoh shining brightest as a magic teacher, Jeff Goldblum doing his thing as the Wizard and Peter Dinklage breaking out his accent again as a goat professor. Jonathan Bailey's caddish Fiyero and Ethan Slater's lovelorn Boq mostly establish a starting point for part two of this epic (this is nearly three hours long), but Bailey, in particular, is charming.

Thanks to a nice blend of comic moments and certified bangers, the (again, very long) running time passes pretty fast, though there are moments when the dancing and singing feels relentless and where you might long for a soothing glimpse of the dull plains of Kansas. Still, despite coming to a pause rather than an ending (*Part Two* is still to come), it quite literally ends on a high note — an intensely powerful one at that — and there's no defying 'Defying Gravity'. **HELEN O'HARA**

VERDICT Cho amps up the colour and spectacle to extraordinary, almost overwhelming heights, but the real magic comes from Erivo and Grande as the frenemies at the story's heart.

The look of lust: Samuel (Harris Dickinson) and Romy (Nicole Kidman). **Below:** Romy with husband Jacob (Antonio Banderas).



FILM

BABYGIRL

NICOLE KIDMAN HAS A FATAL ATTRACTION

★★★★★

OUT 10 JANUARY / CERT TBC / 114 MINS

DIRECTOR Halina Reijn

CAST Nicole Kidman, Harris Dickinson, Sophie Wilde, Antonio Banderas, Gaite Jansen

PLOT Romy (Kidman) risks her marriage to Jacob (Banderas) and her position as a tech CEO when her secret desires are met by Samuel (Dickinson), a new intern at her firm.

NICOLE KIDMAN HAS never been a risk-averse actor. For every commercial notch in her body of work, be it *Bewitched* or *Moulin Rouge!*, there's a *Birth* or *Dogville*: films that mine the darker depths of humanity, often to the extreme. *Babygirl* may not linger in those shadowy corners for quite as long, but is nonetheless a reminder of Kidman's gutsy choices and no-holds-barred approach to performing.

In this film, directed by actor-turned-filmmaker Halina Reijn (who made 2022's excellent Gen-Z murder-mystery *Bodies Bodies Bodies*), Kidman plays high-powered tech-executive Romy, who we immediately meet in the final throes of leg-buckling sex with Jacob (Antonio Banderas), her husband of nearly 20 years. Moments later, she steals away to another part of their family home and secretly climaxes to the flickering glow of submissive porn on her laptop.

By day, Romy serves as the well-respected, freshly-Botoxed face of her New York-based robotics company. In all aspects of her life she has everything to lose, and takes pains to stop that happening. Until she meets Harris Dickinson's anorak-clad and cocky Samuel, who instantly sees a woman unfulfilled in his new boss. It would be easy and expected for writer-director Reijn to set the pair tumbling



down a slippery slope into obsession, boiled bunnies and rigid, dated morality. Instead, she weaves a more complex and impactful tapestry of desire, power and, wonderfully, humour.

Alongside Kidman, Dickinson is impeccable; as Samuel he brings an elusive yet calming presence with a slow half-smile, and ricochets off Romy's ever-shifting moods with a blend of delight, deviance and vulnerability. Only wisps of their former lives are offered up — she was raised via cults and communes, he describes himself as a cuckoo chick, causing chaos in places where he doesn't belong — but it's enough to establish that both weren't born into the world that they operate in today. It's a shared connection that underscores a sexual dance so raw and joyful and gorgeously captured (a shot of Kidman's hair billowing underwater in a swimming pool, in particular) that you find yourself hoping that it won't end.

Of course, the film shifts course as the stakes rise, but by veering away from genre conventions Reijn promises something fresh and sees it through. Banderas is key here, portraying a pillar of patience and earnestness that evokes sympathy but never at the expense of Romy's journey. And what a journey it is, one that pushes Kidman's sensibilities to their limits, at times stripping her down and causing her whole body to sigh and crawl, recoil and unfurl. Through tender and empathetic filmmaking, we see a woman at her most alive. **BETH WEBB**

VERDICT An exploration of carnal desire that is at once fiercely erotic, nuanced and raucously funny, with Kidman charging into the breach, flaws bared, taking everything that Reijn hurls her way.

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BLACK DOVES

★★★★★ TV

"Doesn't try to avoid spy-thriller genre clichés, but instead finds its very individual personality by mashing and twisting them into something surprising, thrilling and much more fun than 90 per cent of current offerings." **OLLY RICHARDS**

BOGART: LIFE COMES IN FLASHES

★★★ FILM

"Bogiephiles who know their *Sahara* from their *Sirocco* may not find much new in Kathryn Ferguson's documentary, but anyone interested in early-to-mid-20th-century Hollywood history will discover plenty to spark further investigation." **NEIL ALCOCK**

ALL WE IMAGINE AS LIGHT

★★★★★ FILM

"Writer/director Payal Kapadia's vision immerses us in the rhythms of Mumbai, guided by moments of unexpected happenstance and beauty. She delivers a memorable and compassionate slice-of-life drama." **GAVIA BAKER-WHITELAW**

OUR LITTLE SECRET

★★★ FILM

"Lindsay Lohan's latest attempt to colonise the Christmas-romantic-comedy market is a typically formulaic seasonal sugar-rush that's only blandly mediocre, rather than so-bad-it's-good: little to laugh at, little to laugh with." **JOHN NUGENT**

MOANA 2

★★★★★ FILM

"Maui's luscious locks have never looked silkier or better-conditioned. It's a touch less fresh than the original, but this is still bursting with energy, emotion, warmth and imagination. It knows the way." **JOHN NUGENT**



SEEING

AS ANTHONY MACKIE'S SAM WILSON PICKS UP THE SHIELD IN

CAPTAIN AMERICA: BRAVE NEW WORLD,

HE FINDS HIMSELF UP AGAINST NOT JUST A HUGE POLITICAL CONSPIRACY, BUT A CERTAIN ROUGE-HUED BEAST.

PREPARE FOR WHAT MIGHT BE THE MCU'S ANGRIEST MOVIE YET...

WORDS CHRIS HEWITT

RED



Think of the number six. At first glance, it's fairly humdrum and meaningless, just another number lost in the infinity gauntlet.

But ask any maths nerd, and they'll tell you that it's actually the smallest perfect number. It is considered by numerous numerologists to be the 'mother' of numbers. Alan Hansen wore the number 6 shirt for Liverpool. Patrick McGoochan's character in *The Prisoner* protested he was a man, not a number; but what a number it was.

And when Anthony Mackie made his Marvel Cinematic Universe debut as Sam Wilson, aka The Falcon, all the way back in 2014's *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, he was assigned a number on the call sheet, the daily production breakdown that, among other things, lists cast members in order of story import. Have a wild guess what that number was. "I do my best work at number six," Mackie tells *Empire*. "That's my Marvel number."

And so it's remained through *Captain America: Civil War*, *Avengers: Infinity War*, *Avengers: Endgame* and *The Falcon And The Winter Soldier*. But things change. Alan Hansen retired, for one. And Sam Wilson is no longer The Falcon. He is the new Captain America. And so, you'd imagine that when Mackie walked onto the set of *Captain America: Brave New World* — the 35th MCU film, the fourth of those to bear the

Captain America name, and the first without Chris Evans as Steve Rogers — the call sheet would reflect that with a bump all the way to the top spot. Not so.

"I never wanted to be number one on a call sheet," says Mackie. "I was like, 'Keep me at number six.' The idea of being number one isn't the accomplishment. The accomplishment is seeing Sam Wilson turn into Captain America."



You could be forgiven for thinking that Sam Wilson turned into Captain America when an aged Steve Rogers handed him *that* shield at the end of *Avengers: Endgame* in 2019. Or if not then, then certainly at the end of the 2021 Disney+ series, *The Falcon And The Winter Soldier* (FAWS, for short), when, after six episodes of soul-searching, Sam finally embraced the role. But the next step wasn't set in stone.

"With the Marvel stuff, you never really know what they're planning on, what's going to happen," admits Mackie. "It became a question of what was next? Is there going to be a Season 2, or in what way is Sam gonna exist in the MCU?"

For Nate Moore, one of Kevin Feige's most trusted lieutenants and executive producer on that show, there was only ever one option, and that was a big, bold big-screen effort, on the same scale as the Steve Rogers trilogy. "It originated off the success of *The Falcon And The Winter Soldier*," he tells *Empire*. "It did feel like the tip of the iceberg.

Sam has finally embraced the idea of being Captain America. But where does he go from there?"

Into a brave new world, naturally. Neither Mackie nor Moore, nor Malcolm Spellman, the FAWS head-writer who also co-wrote *Brave New World*, wanted to repeat themselves. "What the movie is not is 'Falcon And Winter Soldier 2.5,'" says Mackie. That means that FAWS' focus on race, and what it means for the world to have a Black man as Captain America, is not the focus here. "Being a Black man in America, that's something you can't overlook because every day you walk out the house, you have to deal with it," explains Mackie. "It'll always be a subtext, but it's not the focus. I think what we dealt with in the show was specifically for the show."

Likewise, the spotlight is very much on Sam, who has previously been defined by his friendships with Bucky Barnes (who's off with the Thunderbolts), and Steve Rogers (old, retired, possibly living on the moon). He does get a wingman, in the shape of Danny Ramirez as the new Falcon, Joaquin Torres, which in itself is a different dynamic. "He's a mentor of Joaquin," says Ramirez of Sam. "And I think that relationship was also true in real life. I definitely feel like [Mackie] took that role on."

The Falcon And The Ex-Falcon aside, though, this is The Sam Wilson Show, as he finds himself in classic Cap territory, trying to unravel a massive conspiracy which begins with an attempt to assassinate the President in the White House. "We start off as a grounded political thriller," says

**“IT’S REALLY GREAT
TO GET BACK TO
A HULK THAT IS JUST
BREAKING SHIT.”**

JULIUS ONAH



**Left and
below: The Red
Hulk/President
Thaddeus
‘Thunderbolt’
Ross (Harrison
Ford). Bottom:
The Falcon
(Danny Ramirez)
and the new
Captain
America
(Anthony
Mackie).**

Julius Onah, the film’s director. “And then somewhere along the ride, it surprises you in ways you just didn’t see coming.”

The affable, Berlin-based Onah, who previously directed *The Cloverfield Paradox* and 2019 drama *Luce*, is the kind of filmmaker who namedrops Melville (*Le Samourai*), Boorman (*Point Blank*) and Fassbinder (*World On A Wire*) while discussing a Marvel movie. “I don’t want to be that guy who says, ‘I was inspired by this thing’, and then you watch the movie, and you’re like, ‘What the fuck were you talking about?’” he laughs. “We looked at a number of different films. We had a conversation about *The Day Of The Jackal*, and the Pakula trilogy of *Klute*, *All The President’s Men* and *The Parallax View*. These are all movies about people on the move, trying to stay one step ahead of an investigation or an adversary.”

In the MCU, bar a couple of brief appearances for William Sadler’s President Matthew Ellis, the President has largely been an afterthought. That changes with *Brave New World*, for a number of reasons. Firstly, the new President — the man to whom Sam answers — is General Thaddeus ‘Thunderbolt’ Ross. Yes, the man who introduced the Sokovia Accords in *Captain America: Civil War*, and set Sam on a path that ended in unwelcome lodgings. “He definitely shitted on Sam by throwing him in jail,” says Mackie. “That isn’t just forgotten and overlooked. That relationship they have has to be mended and healed, just like it would with anybody else who dishonoured your trust.”

From the MCU’s inception, Ross had been played by the great William Hurt. “He was very excited about the idea of this movie,” says Moore. But after Hurt passed away in 2022, the plans for Ross remained in place. A new President was required. And who better to turn to than a man with one iconic movie President already under his belt?

“I was a little concerned about taking over from Bill Hurt, who was a wonderful actor,” admits Harrison Ford, who steps into the shoes (but not moustache) of Ross, for his second big-screen President after *Air Force One*. “I was ambitious to find the right way of assuming this character after the audience had seen other people doing it. I’m only slightly familiar with the Marvel Universe — I live in another universe — but I have watched a number of Marvel films with wonderful actors, apparently having a good time. And I thought, ‘Well, why not me?’”

But there’s a more sinister change in store for Ross. One which could have huge consequences for Sam (and the wider MCU), as he discovers, to his horror, that the most powerful man on the planet might *actually* be the most powerful man on the planet. Meet the Red Hulk.



Harrison Ford is angry. Contrary to popular belief, you *would* like Harrison Ford when he’s angry. Because, frankly, it’s a hoot.

Empire is on a late-night Zoom call with Ford, who is in Montana, having just wrapped a day >





of filming on *Yellowstone* prequel *1923*. We're in the middle of a question about the appeal of stretching his acting muscles as the Red Hulk when Ford suddenly leans forward and starts shaking his head.

"No! No, no, no, no," he growls. And then — and there's no better way to say this — Harrison Ford Hulks out. He contorts his body, twists his face into a mask of rage. His hands become feral claws, and he emits a guttural roar that nearly shorts our speakers and almost fills our shorts. "The ability to just go RRRRRRRR-AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARRRRRRRRRRR-HHHHHH [sic] is not the highest ambition that I have as an actor," he says.

It gives *Empire*, separated by a computer screen and several thousand miles, just a hint of what it was like to witness Ford doing this on set. Onah describes that experience as "mind-blowing. All of us on set were like, 'Holy fucking shit, he nailed it.' It's really great to get back to a Hulk that is just fucking breaking shit, and a rage monster." Xosha Roquemore, who plays Leila Taylor, the head of Ross' security detail, had a front-row seat. "Doing things like that as an actor is really vulnerable," she says. "Everyone's watching you go crazy. To watch that time after time was inspiring."

There's a sense that Marvel could have made back the film's budget if they'd sold tickets to watch Ford Hulk out. "He went full at it," says Mackie. "He would throw himself on the ground, he would do all this crazy stuff that you wouldn't

expect him to do as an 80-something-year-old man." For Ford, though, it was "just another day at the office. I tried to understand the ambition of the filmmakers, and to be useful to them. I just didn't sit home at night and say, 'Oh, what do I want to do when I turn into the Hulk?' It didn't seem to me to be a terribly difficult acting proposition." Don't tell Mark Ruffalo.

The Red Hulk has only been knocking around Marvel Comics since 2008 (the same year William Hurt first played Ross), but he's made a huge impact. Introduced as an adversary for the O.G. (Overly Green) Hulk, the Red Hulk is every bit as strong as the jade giant, but with an added bonus: the madder he gets, the hotter he gets. "It's not 'Hulk Plus,'" says Moore. "Because that makes it sound like Hulk needs a plus, but it's fun to play with ideas like that." The burning question is, when did Moore and co decide to pull the trigger on Red Hulk Ross? "It came pretty early days," adds Moore. "We loved the idea of seeing an evolution of Thaddeus Ross, and we knew that journey ended up at some point in Red Hulk."

In the comics, Red Hulk's true identity was initially a mystery, before he was finally revealed as Thunderbolt Ross, who after years of Elmer Fudding his way through endless attempts to destroy the Hulk had decided, if you can't beat 'em, join 'em and then beat the hell out of 'em. In *Brave New World*, there is no mystery around who the Red Hulk is. "One minute he's President, the next minute he's fucked," notes Ford.

How true. As teased in the trailer, Ross will

transform into the mardy monster in full view of the world and his Secret Service security detail. "That's not in the training camp at Secret Service college," laughs Roquemore. "I think everyone's trying to figure that out on their feet." And later, he will go toe-to-toe with Sam in the streets of Washington DC. Which poses something of a problem for the new Cap. Yes, he has a nifty pair of Wakandan-made wings, and a shield whose claims to indestructibility are about to be sorely tested. But the man himself is human. Just one flick of the Red Hulk's little finger could reduce him to Jam Wilson. How can he hold his own against a force of nature? "Sam is a very cerebral character, a very thoughtful character," adds Mackie. "He was introduced to us as a counsellor. He does not have the serum, his ability is not that of brute force. He has to be able to manoeuvre, react, initiate, but also talk or counsel his way out of situations."

So, the mystery of the MCU Hulk isn't who he is, but how this transformation came to be. "I don't think I want to go very much into what the mechanism is and how he is being controlled," says Ford. "I don't think that there's a choice. Didn't feel like it at the time."

So, who's doing the controlling, then? All roads lead to The Leader.



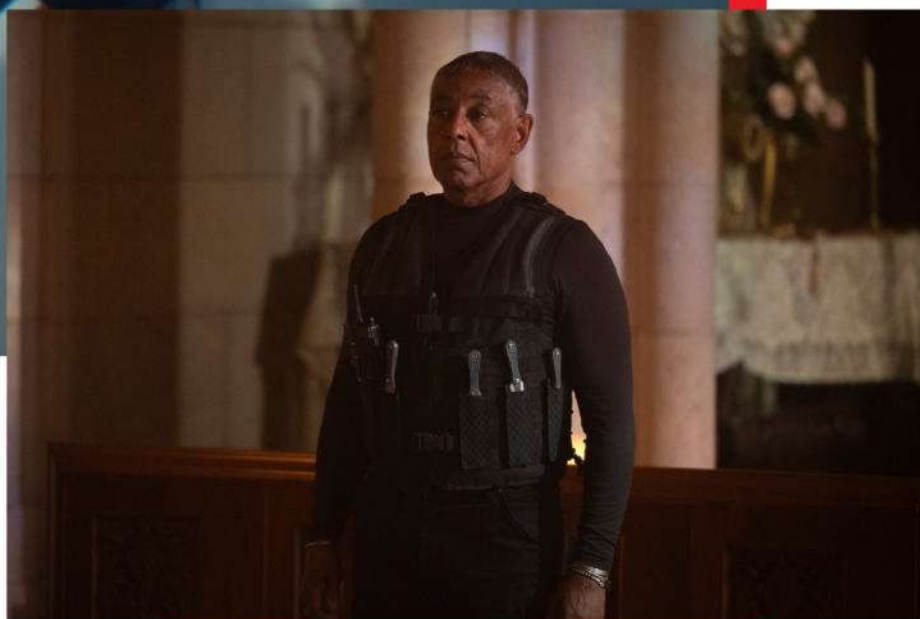
The last time we saw Tim Blake Nelson in the MCU, it was in 2008's *The Incredible Hulk*, the

**“SAM DOES NOT HAVE
THE SERUM... HE
HAS TO BE ABLE TO
MANOEUVRE, REACT,
INITIATE.”**

ANTHONY MACKIE



Top to bottom:
New Cap soars
to new heights;
The Serpent
Society's leader,
Sidewinder
(Giancarlo
Esposito); Ford
with director
Julius Onah
on set.



REMEMBER US?

**SAMUEL STERNS ISN'T THE
ONLY LONG-DORMANT
CHARACTER WHO COULD
MAKE AN MCU COMEBACK**



THE HOWLING COMMANDOS

An elite World War II fighting squad led by a man named Dum Dum (Neal McDonough), the Howling Commandos fought alongside Captain America in 2011's *The First Avenger*, and haven't been seen since. It's unlikely they were all frozen in ice, but there's franchise potential here. 'Dum Dum And Dumber', anyone?



THE SCORPION

This villain was the sting in the tail at the end of *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, with Michael Mando recruited to play Mac Gargan (a jailmate of Michael Keaton's the Vulture), who is better known as the Scorpion. Perhaps he's stuck in solitary confinement, which is a better fate than the Vulture's, who showed up briefly in *Morbius*, looking completely baffled.



EROS

No larger ball has been dropped than Eros, introduced at the end of *Eternals*. Not just because he's Thanos' much more attractive brother, but because he's played by Harry Styles, the kind of star you don't tend to sideline. Alas, as with most things *Eternals*, it looks like Eros' MCU future is only going in one direction.



ELON MUSK

A billionaire rival of Tony Stark's, seen briefly in *Iron Man 2*. It's all gone radio-silent since, though. What could he have been up to since 2010? Who knows, but we're excited to find out.

Can't be anything as outlandish as lashing billions of dollars on a social-media platform, we're sure.



**“THIS IS ABOUT ONE
MAN TRYING TO DEAL
WITH HIS OWN
HISTORY, WITH HIS
OWN TEMPERAMENT.”**

HARRISON FORD

MCU's second film. In fact, the MCU wouldn't be known as the MCU for a few years. Which isn't to say that Kevin Feige and team weren't already laying track for destinations unknown.

So when Nelson's Samuel Sterns, a scientist trying to help Bruce Banner (who then looked like Edward Norton) curb his Hulkish enthusiasm, is infected by gamma-irradiated Banner blood that starts to mutate and warp his head, it was a seed planted; one that would eventually see Sterns become the Hulk's arch-enemy, The Leader.

But that seed never sprouted. *The Incredible Hulk's* lukewarm reception meant that Banner (who now looked like Mark Ruffalo) was deployed elsewhere. And Nelson's phone stayed silent. “I'd begun to think that I had the reverse Midas Touch,” he laughs.

Sterns' greatest strength isn't his strength. It's his intellect, that mutated head housing one of the biggest (albeit not necessarily emotionally stable) brains on the planet. “I requested that we do what we were going to do, practically,” says Nelson of the Leader's virtual planetoid of a bonce. “Which was a huge help, because I liked being able to feel the weight of the deformation on my head, rather than just wearing dots.”

So we have not one but two iconic Hulk villains. Plus Liv Tyler returning as Betty Ross, ex-lover of Bruce Banner and daughter of Thunderbolt. “He's eager to redeem himself in his daughter's eyes,” says Ford of Ross' relationship with Betty. So, in many ways, this

Captain America sequel is actually a belated stealth sequel to *The Incredible Hulk*. “When I was a kid, I always loved it when there were unexpected characters intersecting,” explains Moore. “We felt that this was a really interesting time to revisit Ross and Sterns and Betty Ross as well. And it didn't feel like we'd be wedging it in. It actually felt like we could really explore it.”



It's not all been plain sailing towards this *Brave New World*. The project was first announced under a different name — ‘Captain America (that part is non-negotiable): New World Order’ — only for that to change once filming was underway. “I think ‘New World Order’ was a title we thought was really interesting, and sort of moody and scary,” says Moore. “And to be quite honest, some of the feedback we got, internally and externally, was that that phrase has, unfortunately, been co-opted in the real world in a way that made people uncomfortable.”

If that made people uncomfortable, you ain't seen nothing yet. The film was initially meant to come out in May of last year, and was then pushed back not once, but twice, following the impact of the various Hollywood strikes of 2023. Eventually, it settled in February, which means that a movie in which the American President is a rampaging rage monster, possibly manipulated by outside interests, will be released just a couple of weeks after Donald Trump is sworn back into

the White House. It's unfortunate timing, but it almost certainly won't stop some people accusing the film of all kinds of political point-scoring. “We never try to tell stories that feel ripped from the headlines,” says Moore, who in fairness would have had to have the Time Stone to foresee this particular turn of events. “The best we can do is try and anchor our stories in a world that feels real. And sometimes fiction and non-fiction line up in unexpected and unintended ways.”

Any resemblance to US Presidents living or dead is entirely coincidental, in other words. “So far we have not had a President who can transform into a Hulk,” deadpans Ford. “We have not faced these kinds of circumstances in our political life, although we've had enough of a glimpse of the range of political life to realise that we could really end up in a political Marvel movie. But that's not what this is about. This is about one man trying to deal with his own history, with his own temperament, with his own circumstances.”

The ping-ponging of the film's release date, along with rumours of extensive reshoots and significant retooling of the movie in response to negative test-screening reactions, has led to suggestions that the film might be troubled. Something that its makers strongly deny. “It wasn't retooled at all,” says Mackie. “Every Marvel movie I've done has done reshoots, so it's not retooling or remaking. You basically get the movie and the story you want, you edit it together, then go back and shoot a few more scenes.”



Top to bottom:
Red alert; Ruth
Bat-Seraph, aka
Sabra (Shira
Haas); Head Of
Security Leila
Taylor (Xosha
Roquemore)
gets serious
with Cap.



Still, the rewrites and reshoots were hefty enough to incorporate a new set of secondary villains, The Serpent Society, a nefarious organisation led by Giancarlo Esposito's Seth Voelker, aka Sidewinder. (Yes, they're all named after snakes. It's their thing.) "I jumped into this thing," laughs Esposito, who joined the production in its additional-photography phase earlier this year. "I was in basic training for four days. So I just stay calm and deal with what I have. And I'm excited about this because people haven't seen me in this light. I'm pretty badass, and I have a pretty big gun, and yes, he knows how to use it."



Despite these travails, Marvel will be hoping that *Brave New World* will be a (Red Hulk) smash, and can continue the recovery that started with *Deadpool & Wolverine*, with audiences flocking back to the MCU after its recent wobble. And there's no question that Marvel is very much in the Anthony Mackie-as-Cap business. "There is certainly more story to be told for Captain America," says Moore. "Sam might find that, moving forward, he might be jumping out of the frying pan and into the proverbial fire."

That fire will almost certainly involve the Avengers. One of the storylines set in motion by *Brave New World* sees Sam tasked by Ross with assembling a new group. "I think that Avengers teams are best when they are led by a Captain America," says Moore. "And this movie gives us a little bit of space to talk about, 'Where are the Avengers? What does it mean to have Avengers, and is Sam the right guy to lead them?'"

Whether or not we see that team at the end of this movie remains to be seen. But place your bets now on it having reinforcements in the shape of Torres ("I'm incredibly excited to continue throwing down," says Ramirez, tentatively), and maybe — just maybe — one Thaddeus 'Thunderbolt' Ross, and a certain scarlet-skinned strongman. "I'm awaiting my new assignment," teases Ford. "I think it'll be fascinating to see where that character goes, if he goes anywhere."

Mackie is keeping mum on Sam's position within the Avengers, but he's enthusiastic about reuniting with the Russo brothers on *Avengers: Doomsday*, which will see the return of Robert Downey Jr, this time as the new Big Bad of the MCU, Doctor Doom. "I'm really looking forward to getting back on set with the Russos," says Mackie. "They understand this Marvel world in a very unique way. And just having him [Downey Jr] back adds so much. To see what he brings to the table is just a huge opportunity."

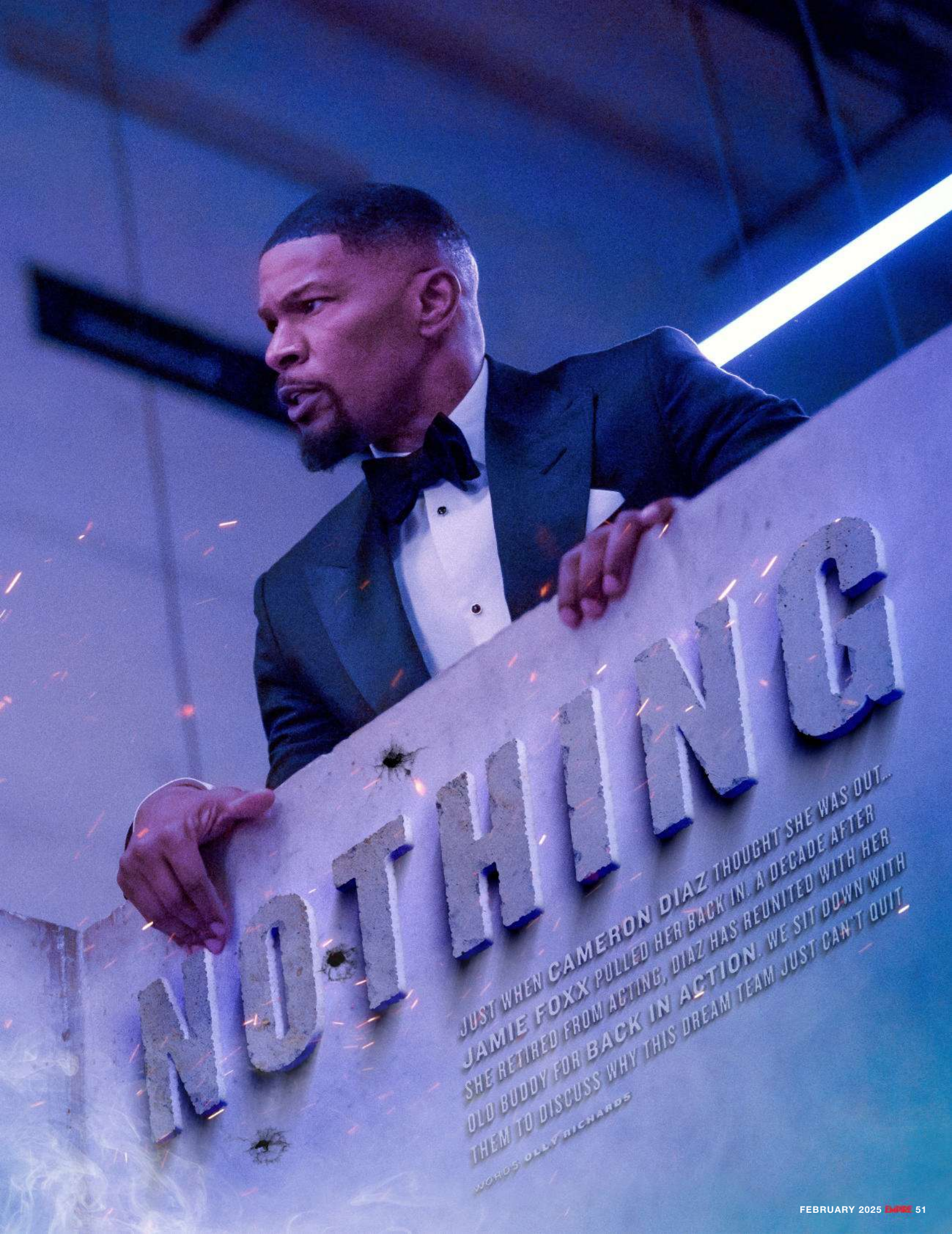
Heaven help the poor sod who has to put together the call sheet for that one. At least one number will be set in stone. "When I finish," laughs Mackie, "I want them to retire number six!" Its days are surely numbered. 🍌

CAPTAIN AMERICA: BRAVE NEW WORLD IS IN CINEMAS

FROM 14 FEBRUARY



DOUBLE OR

A full-page photograph of Cameron Diaz. She is wearing a dark tuxedo jacket over a white shirt and a dark bow tie. She is looking off to the side with a serious expression. She is holding a large, light-colored rectangular sign with the word "NOTHING" in large, 3D, metallic-looking letters. The sign has some small holes and sparks are flying around it. The background is dark and industrial, with a bright light source creating a lens flare effect.

NOTHING

JUST WHEN CAMERON DIAZ THOUGHT SHE WAS OUT...
JAMIE FOXX PULLED HER BACK IN. A DECADE AFTER
SHE RETIRED FROM ACTING, DIAZ HAS REUNITED WITH HER
OLD BUDDY FOR BACK IN ACTION. WE SIT DOWN WITH
THEM TO DISCUSS WHY THIS DREAM TEAM JUST CAN'T QUIT

WORDS: OLLY RICHARDS

IN 2014, CAMERON DIAZ RETIRED FROM ACTING.

After finishing work on a remake of *Annie*, in which she played foster-home matriarch Miss Hannigan, Diaz called an end to her Hollywood career, which had generated over \$3 billion in the US alone and seen her work with the likes of Martin Scorsese, Oliver Stone and Tom Cruise. That retirement, however, is now over.

Diaz returns next month in *Back In Action*, a family action-comedy, and in a sense she's picking up where she left off. It reunites her with Jamie Foxx, her co-star in *Annie* (he played entrepreneur Will Stacks), as well as Oliver Stone's 1999 sports drama *Any Given Sunday*.

Here they play Emily and Matt, a pair of spies who fall in love while working undercover and leave their dangerous world to start a family. However, after 15 years, in which they've become just another suburban couple with two kids, a secret from their past comes back to haunt them and forces the couple to brush off their espionage skills. Directed by Seth Gordon, and also starring Glenn Close as Emily's mother, Andrew Scott as a British intelligence chief, and Jamie Demetriou as a wannabe agent of limited intelligence, *Back In Action* sees Diaz and Foxx tearing across the world trying to juggle international terrorist incidents and childcare.

We got the pair together *again* to talk about action, about Diaz stepping back into the industry she swore she was done with, and about a devastating medical incident Foxx suffered

during production on the film. For both of them, this reunion marked a huge milestone in their lives, and cemented a friendship that's been nearly three decades in the making. But is Diaz back for good?

Cameron, this is the first movie you've made in ten years. How did it happen? Did Jamie call and persuade you, or were you looking to act again?

Jamie Foxx: We just had our fingers crossed that Cameron Diaz would come and bless us.

Cameron Diaz: I thought that if I was going to come back and do a movie, the only person I'd come back and do it with would be this guy.

Foxx: Oh, come on.

Diaz: Seriously. I had other opportunities along the way and I was always saying, "No. I'm not doing it, I've told you... What? Jamie asked? Jamie? Oh I can do a movie with *Jamie!*"

And why only Jamie?

Diaz: Well, first off, he's the most talented person on the planet. The last film I did, before the ten years when I didn't do movies —

Foxx: *Annie's* been ten years?!

Diaz: Yep. And prior to that we did *Any Given Sunday*, which was a wild-ass movie.

Foxx: Wow, that was crazy.

Diaz: Being one of the only women on that set and all of the everything that was happening on that set and the energy, behaviour and everything around it, Jamie was the guy who was so good to me in that. He made everything okay for me to be there. And wasn't doing the things other people were doing. The craziness.

Foxx: I was just reading my Bible.

Diaz: He's the nicest human on planet Earth, so I knew that if I was coming back that I would be stepping into the best possible situation with the best possible partner.

When you stopped making movies, it was reported that you'd "retired". Is that how you viewed it?

Diaz: Oh, yeah. I was not making any more movies. Zero. I was done.

Why?

Diaz: I did it for 20-something years. I just wanted to do some other shit in my life, you know? I met my husband (*Benji Madden*, formerly lead guitarist in the band *Good Charlotte*) and we were both in the same place at the same time, wanting the same thing. We wanted to build our family and have a life. He left his career and started a new one. I left mine and started a different one. Then it was just somehow ten years later. Then Covid happened. When Jamie came to me with this, it was just as everybody was coming back into the world, and Benj and I talked about it. He said, "I want you to go and kick ass." And I wanted that for our family, to get out of quarantine and into the world.

Jamie, how confident were you that Cameron would say yes? And what made

Clockwise from main: Married couple Matt (Jamie Foxx) and Emily (Cameron Diaz) are — yes! — back in action; With kids Alice (McKenna Roberts) and Leo (Rylan Jackson); Things get heated.





you ask her, if you knew she'd retired?

Foxx: It wasn't about confidence. You just ask with respect. And it's Cameron Diaz! She's so cool. I'll be out in the street and people will be like, "Man, I heard Cameron Diaz is [making a movie]. Is that going ahead?!"

How did it feel being back on a movie set, Cameron?

Diaz: It's like riding a bike. I was thinking, "Oh my God, am I going to die on this thing? Do I know how to pedal?!" They took such good care of me from beginning to end on this film, and helped me know it was a safe space and we were all here to create the same thing.

You're both throwing yourself into a lot of action in this. What was it like getting



back on that bike together?

Diaz: Well, action is Jamie's favourite thing to do.

That sounded like it might be sarcastic...

Foxx: I am a wimp! I am wimpy. I am not Django. Cameron would do the stunts. We had to run over this bridge [the Millennium Bridge in London]. It's cold. It's nighttime. I do not like cold climates. We're running over this bridge, so I say, "We really need to protect Cameron. I don't think we should do this too many times. We need to be respectful of her time." And Cameron's like, "I CAN GO AGAIN! I'LL DO IT 20 TIMES!" I'm pulling hamstrings and shit. I've got on heat packs. I learned very quickly that Cameron is no joke when it comes to action. I'm an old motherfucker! I'm old as shit. But that dynamic was fun as well. Cameron is fearless. And you don't always find that — especially with me.

Now, there is some slander against the British people in this movie that we need to address. There is a running joke that British people are not huggers. Is this something you've observed?

Foxx: You guys are very warm people. I apologise.

A lot of the movie takes place in London. Of course you've been before, but what did you experience in London this time?

Diaz: Getting to stay there was so great. It's like a small town. It's a city that's like a small town. I had a great time.

Foxx: Daniel Kaluuya threw a party. He's like (*Daniel Kaluuya voice*), "Bruv. Wait 'til you come to this party, man. You're going to really enjoy it. We go off." I'm like, "Whatever, I've been to parties." We danced for *hours* and I was like, "We don't do this in LA! We don't do this in Hollywood!" The woman who was in *Black Panther*, Letitia Wright, she was there. They danced like they weren't famous, you know. They danced like it was just fun. It was great. They looked after me.

You clearly get on, or you wouldn't have made three films together. How did you first meet?

Foxx: I was working on [1990s sitcom] *In Living Color* and she was doing *The Mask* with Jim Carrey. She came to the set (*Carrey was one of In*



Living Color's breakout stars) and we were just blown away by this incredible person. I met her briefly and then she went on to do amazing work with Jim Carrey and just took off like a rocket.

Diaz: *In Living Color* was something I'd grown up with. I turned 21 on the set of *The Mask*. *In Living Color* was like my teenage years. I remember going there, so excited to see everybody that had made me laugh. I remember shaking Jamie's hand and being like, "Oh, my God!"

And it was several years later that you worked together on Oliver Stone's *Any Given Sunday*. Did you know each other well by that point?

Foxx: No, it doesn't go like that.

Diaz: We weren't, like, hanging out.

Foxx: In our business, if you do connect with someone you work with, that's *rare*. Our connection came later. *Any Given Sunday* was a whirlwind of a movie, so there was not a lot of time to hang out. I was just trying to stay hydrated because it was so quick. But when we were working on *Any Given Sunday*, having had that brief encounter [on *In Living Colour*] does help.

Diaz: When you do movies with people, whether or not you're working together every

day or you're a day player, you're part of something together. *Any Given Sunday* was a very particular experience, because of the amount of people on set and how fast it moved and what was being accomplished. So, I think anybody who did that movie feels like they did a tour in the military and survived. So we have that as a common thing. We shared that experience. Then we did *Annie* many years later, which was the same kind of thing. It's a musical. We're dipping into something where we're both like, "So how does this go?" We got more time to work together, which was great. But we're not like, "Hey, we're buddy-buddies!" It's like we have a camaraderie because we've done things together. We've been through things. But I adore this man, and after this movie I consider him a friend.

Foxx: Now we're hanging out!

You've described working on *Any Given Sunday* several times in this conversation, using words like "whirlwind" and "like a military tour". What was it that made that experience so intense?

Foxx: I think what we're saying is it was a football movie, so it's a lot.

Diaz: Also, the whole shoot was only 60



Facing page, top to bottom: The air con possibly needed to go down a notch; Emily's mum Ginny (Glenn Close) is handy with a frying pan. This page, top to bottom: Kyle Chandler co-stars as Chuck; Far from 'average parents' now; Foxx and Diaz in 1999's *Any Given Sunday*; And enjoying themselves in *Annie* (2014).



days. They were pulling the plug at 60 days. There were six units going at one time.

You've now done a sports movie, a musical and an action movie together. Any other genres planned for you as a pairing?

Foxx: I think we'll just watch what this movie does. We're just growing up together.

Diaz: No more romcoms. Only momcoms.

Jamie, you experienced what you described as a medical situation during production on this film. You've chosen not to talk about details (Foxx was hospitalised in April 2023 and at the time of going to press had not publicly discussed the specifics), but you've filmed a Netflix special about the experience. Can we ask about what it was like to do that?

Foxx: I will tell you this, that when you dream, you don't dream tragedy. You dream the great dream: "I'm going to have the house and I'm going to have the money." So when something [bad] happens, you need really good people to rely on. I had really great people to rely on. That's the first phase. When you come out of that, you need other people to tell you, "Everything's okay, now let's go back to what you were doing." When I got back on the set with



Cameron, there was a hug, there was a moment, and we got back to what we were doing.

Being on stage [for the special] was a way for me to cleanse a bit. I don't call what I just did 'stand-up comedy'. I call it an artistic explanation and a thank you to everybody that prayed, to everybody that said, "Man, I'm glad you're okay." It's a thank you and you'll *feel* it when you watch. There are moments where I'm just telling the story. There are moments where we might not be able to get the funny in. But I will say that it was necessary and I will say to the people that were in that building in Atlanta [where the special was shot] that they were beautiful and they were forgiving. I hadn't been on stage in 18 years.

How did it feel to be on stage again, and particularly how did it feel to be talking about something so sensitive?

Foxx: It was one of those things where I said, "Hey, man, I've got to lean on you all right now because I'm tired of crying." Because every time I ran into somebody they're crying.

Diaz: When I saw him I was definitely crying.

Foxx: I ran into [rapper] T.I. — he won't want me to say this — and he got a little misty. "What's happening with you, partner?" Oh, bro, and I'm face-timing Snoop [Dogg] and Snoop's starting to get misty. I say, "Snoop, we can't do this." (*perfect Snoop Dogg voice*) "Why, cuz?" "Cause Crips don't cry." I'll be done with it here, but I want to say thank you to everyone that helped me, thank you to my friends who said, "Let's get back on the horse and ride." And thank you to Netflix who gave me the opportunity to be able to share something that's different.

Cameron, having returned to acting for this, you have at least one other project announced. Do you consider this a permanent return?

Diaz: I did ten days on Jonah Hill's movie [*Outcome*] with Keanu Reeves and Matt Bomer. It was shot here in LA and it just lined up. It made it very easy for me to say yes, because of the people involved and the location and timing. When those situations come up, I think I'm probably open to considering them because I can pull it off now. I loved doing [*Back In Action*] for all the reasons we've discussed, and I loved working with Keanu and Matt.

But you don't consider yourself to be back acting full time in the way you were before?

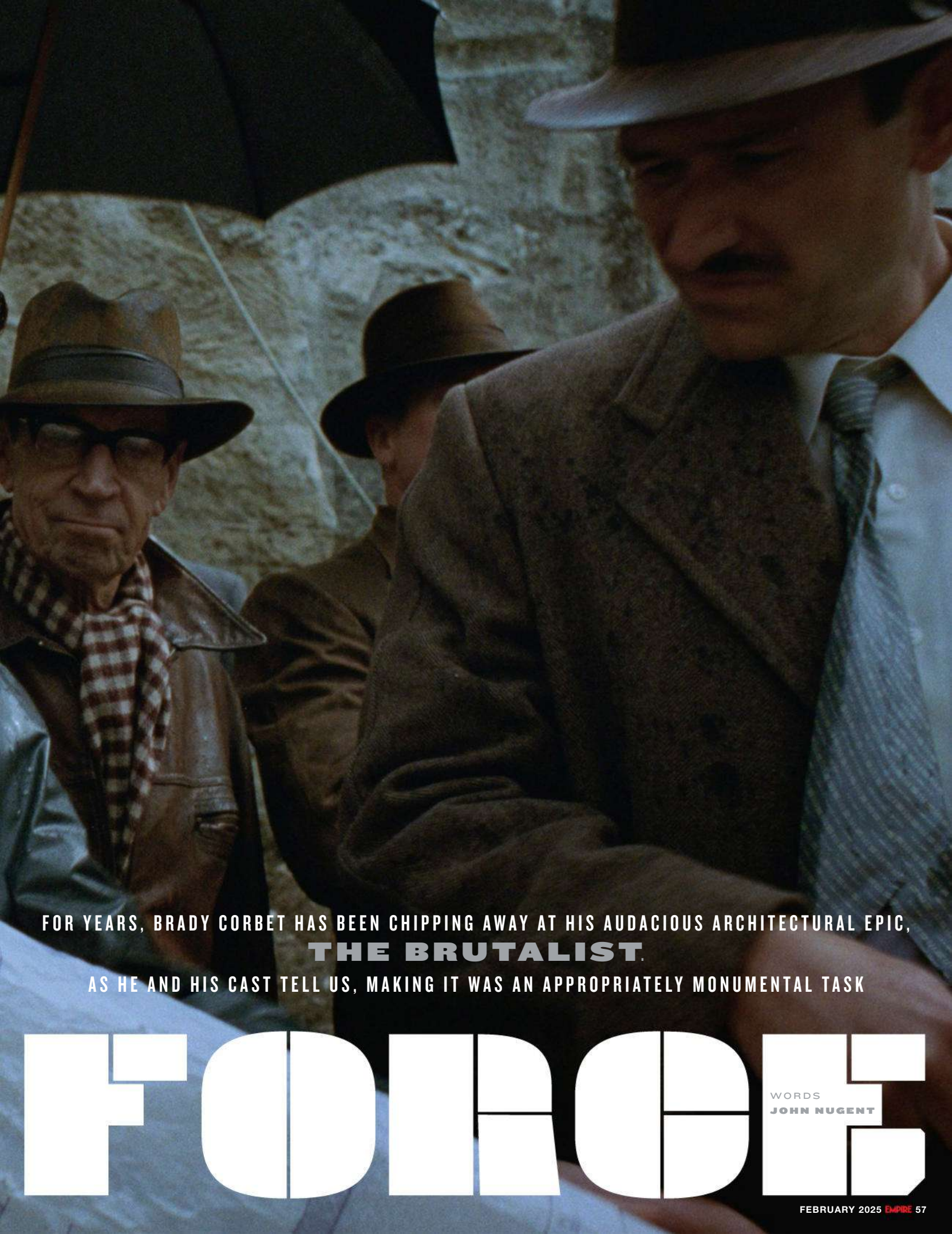
Diaz: I don't know how I view it. It's hard to say. If I say it then it becomes this thing. I reserve the right to say no to doing a movie ever again, and I reserve the right to say yes if I decide to. I'm not defining anything. I'm just open to whatever makes sense for me and my family at any given moment.

Foxx: I feel lucky and blessed that I was able to work with Cameron. When people are buzzing about Cameron being back, I feel good that I had something to do with it. 🍷

BACK IN ACTION IS ON NETFLIX FROM 17 JANUARY

ROUTE





FOR YEARS, BRADY CORBET HAS BEEN CHIPPING AWAY AT HIS AUDACIOUS ARCHITECTURAL EPIC,
THE BRUTALIST.

AS HE AND HIS CAST TELL US, MAKING IT WAS AN APPROPRIATELY MONUMENTAL TASK

FOUR

WORDS
JOHN NUGENT

"There are so many parallels," says Brady Corbet, "between making a film and building a building."

Films, like buildings, are big endeavours. They can often be miraculous undertakings, sometimes ruinously expensive, demanding a unique mix of an artist's vision and a wealthy benefactor's wallet. Their creation can require a leap of faith. But they also tell us much about ourselves, and the time in which they were made.

Nearly a decade ago, Corbet began construction on his biggest project to date: *The Brutalist*. Set between 1947 and 1980, the 215-minute film — which includes a 15-minute intermission — tells the story of fictional architect László Tóth (Adrien Brody), a Hungarian Jew who escapes war-ravaged Europe to seek a new life in the United States. Fleeing fascism, he instead encounters capitalist corruption in the form of millionaire patron

Harrison Lee Van Buren (Guy Pearce), who enlists him to create a community centre in his small Pennsylvania neighbourhood. Soon, inevitably, the American dream curdles. It is a film as ambitious as a skyscraper. Even Corbet himself struggles to pin it down.

"I had wanted to do a film on the artist-patron dynamic," he explains of the initial impulses that set him and his co-writer (and wife), Mona Fastvold, on this journey. "We were interested in architecture. We were interested in making a movie about the creative process. We were thinking about immigration stories. And we were interested in writing something about a relationship that weathers all of the professional and personal chaos of a lifetime." He ponders it all. "This film is a sort of an opera. Taken to mythological heights."

Not exactly modest ambitions, then. But the gambit appears to have paid off. The reactions since the film's Venice Film Festival premiere back in September have been nothing short of extravagant. So what is it about this three-and-a-half-hour independent film about architecture that has people tripping over themselves to offer effusive praise? And what *does* it tell us about ourselves?

This, it seems, is a film built to last. As its star, Adrien Brody, explains: "Like the yearnings of my character, [we were] trying to leave behind this monumental thing that outlives us — that is bigger than ourselves."



Above: László Tóth (Adrien Brody) and wife Erzébet (Felicity Jones). **Main:** The Van Buren community centre starts to take stark shape. **Right:** A new horizon. **Left:** Capitalist Harrison Lee Van Buren Sr (Guy Pearce) and, below, his entitled son Harry (Joe Alwyn).





Brady Corbet has always found inspiration in the trauma of the past. His first feature film as director, the Robert Pattinson-starring *The Childhood Of A Leader*, imagined the early years of a fictional future dictator; his second, *Vox Lux*, dipped its toes into school shootings and corrosive pop culture, with Natalie Portman as a troubled singer. “I have a personal obsession with relitigating our recent past,” he explains. “It’s hard not to look at the news every morning and not feel like we’re living inside of a total dumpster fire. It’s a disaster. And I’m interested in how we have arrived at such an extreme and calamitous moment in our cycle as a people.”

With fascism and capitalism never far from the headlines, the time seemed ripe to explore what happened in the middle of the 20th century, when the world last rejected the former and embraced the latter. Buildings from the ‘Brutalist’ movement, the stark,

concrete minimalist structures that emerged in the 1950s, neatly reflected the tension of “modernity and antiquity, butting heads and in dialogue with one another,” Corbet says. “What I’m most especially interested in is this sort of ‘ambient history’. I’m very interested in what was in the water in the 1950s that produced these extraordinary monuments for us that look almost like science-fiction. The entire film is about post-war psychology and post-war architecture.”

It was also a way for Corbet to make a film, indirectly, about filmmaking. He has spent a lifetime on film sets, beginning his career as a child actor — including an early appearance in 2004’s *Thunderbirds*, as Alan Tracy — before becoming an arthouse staple, working with the likes of Michael Haneke and Olivier Assayas. His last outing as director, *Vox Lux*, he says, “was an incredibly difficult movie to make, for a million and one reasons”, from tussles over budget to shooting on 35mm film.

With *The Brutalist*, he and Fastvold wanted to find a way to tell a story about the creative tensions that come with making an independent film on your own terms. “I’ve been asked before if I would ever make a film about making a movie,” he says. “It’d be a little bit like making a movie about the Department of Motor Vehicles. It’s so administrative!” he laughs. “Ninety per cent of my experience working on a movie is hashing stuff out in an office trying to make tax credits function. So, architecture was a [different] way in.”

Like all of Corbet’s films, *The Brutalist* is brimming with ideas and ambition and complex themes. But the scale here is noticeably bigger. In the writing process — which he describes as “something of an exorcism” — Corbet and Fastvold “would occasionally speak about” certain cinematic touchpoints: Bernardo Bertolucci’s *1900* (317 minutes) and Sergio Leone’s *Once Upon A Time In America* (269 minutes), both grand epics about politics and



Lee Van Buren tracks down
László on a construction site.

people, playing out on a vast canvas. “We knew that it would be something of an American saga,” Corbet acknowledges.

It was always planned to be long. And the choice of shooting on 35mm film, to be converted into the long-dormant 70mm VistaVision format — a giant-screen format in the days before IMAX, last used for an American film in 1961’s Marlon Brando-directed *One-Eyed Jacks* — was an important early decision. “VistaVision for *The Brutalist* felt like a no-brainer,” says Corbet, “because it was a technology that was engineered in the 1950s. We felt that it was the best way to access the period.” An avowed cinephile and technical nerd, he will talk the ear off you in explaining the subtle differences of film stocks (“You normally would shoot three or four perforations in a regular movie — this is double that”); he strongly believes that traditional film is a prerequisite for him. “I mean, a DCP [digital cinema package] versus a 70mm print are not at all the same thing. One looks like a giant laptop and then the other one looks like a *movie!*”

Still, Corbet insists he never set out to make an epic. “In many ways, the movie is extremely intimate and equally devoted to more minimalistic set-ups, as opposed to more maximalist set-pieces,” he says. There are deeper, more personal roots to the film: both Corbet and Fastvold have architects in their family trees. And Corbet remembers hearing stories growing up from family members clearly

traumatised by World War II. “My great-uncle had a Purple Heart,” he says. “He was shot out of the sky. He was very much a product of the mid-century. He just didn’t talk about it. So I was really fascinated by all of the struggles that come with that sort of trauma that no-one feels comfortable talking about.”

It was personal, too, for Corbet’s effective avatar in the film, Adrien Brody, who plays the brilliant but troubled László Tóth, a character with whom the actor shares more than a few parallels. “I’ve yearned to have a role of this complexity, that speaks to so many things that are personal to me,” says Brody, speaking to *Empire* on Zoom. “It’s very meaningful.” At this point, Brody looks visibly moved. “I’ve had a lifetime of preparation for this role.”

In the 1950s, a couple of decades before he was born, Brody’s family came to the United States as refugees. Like László Tóth, the character Brody would one day portray, they were fleeing their native Hungary for a better life. “I come from very humble beginnings,” says the actor. “I’ve never taken that for granted. I wish my grandparents were able to have seen some of my trajectory. Their struggles have informed so much of my own process.” The film’s opening sequence mirrors his family’s journey, arriving by boat to New York harbour and Ellis Island, to be greeted by the Statue Of Liberty.

After settling in America, Brody’s mother,

Sylvia Plachy, became a well-respected photographer, working for many New York publications, including *The Village Voice*. Like Tóth, her experience as an immigrant informed her work as an artist, a “sensitivity” that can be seen in her art, Brody says. “I know that what she’s overcome has shaped her and has given her greater definition and clarity in her work. She’s instilled a lot of that into my journey as an artist.”

When filming for *The Brutalist* began in early 2023 — in a bit of neat artistic irony, Hungary standing in for America — Brody was thrilled to have his parents visit the Budapest set. “I mean, my mom has seen it all,” he says. “But I think visiting this set and seeing this film was particularly meaningful.” His background gave him a head-start on the thick Hungarian accent he had to adopt, too. “I very much remember my grandparents’ dialect. We worked with a wonderful dialect coach and found a voice of that era that was very reminiscent of my grandfather’s tonality and cadence.” He chuckles. “Shooting in Budapest, I also had a responsibility to not sound like a fool in front of my crew.”

It was challenging for Felicity Jones too, playing Tóth’s wife Erzsébet, who did not have the Hungarian background of her co-star. “That was a huge aspect of the film,” she says. “Both Adrien and I worked tirelessly on the accent for months. I listened to an extraordinary audio recording that’s in the British Library archive of a woman called Heidi Fischer.”

Erzsébet is not seen until halfway through



Left, top to bottom: László and cousin Attila (Alessandro Nivola) refurbish the Van Buren library; The Italian quarry that supplies the centre's white Carrara marble; A post-war reunion for the Tóths; Sparks fly as László oversees an early project.

the film, after the intermission. But her presence is felt from the start. "That time we don't see her is where the audience are asked to imagine the trauma of the experience that she's been going through," says Jones. There is an undercurrent of unspoken trauma running throughout the film: the Tóths escaped the Holocaust and the Nazis, but belong to a culture and generation that would keep that pain under wraps. "It must have just been so incredibly lonely," says Corbet. "It was not encouraged to express your feelings in that culture. For [László], it comes out in his work, and in his inability to even say, 'I love you,' to his wife. I mean, I think the only time it is said in the movie, he says, 'I love you, you cow.'"

László's psychology is embedded in the cement itself. The film's production designer, Judy Becker — whose task it was to design the Van Buren community centre that the character spends much of the film building — was determined to find storytelling through design. "I really tried to think through László's psychology and his experience — what his influences and experiences would have been," Becker explains. "I've often called myself

a 'Method designer', but in this case, it was really important." (Becker's attention to detail extended to designing using imperial measurements, as Tóth would have done, even though her crew worked in the metric system.)

There is a concerted effort, it seems for everyone on *The Brutalist*, to think deeply about what is happening under these characters' skins. Guy Pearce, as wealthy industrialist Harrison Lee Van Buren, loved the stately pace he was encouraged to take by Corbet. "He has a very particular view on behaviour and psychology and personality," Pearce says. "In this day and age, where everything is short and sweet, this feels like it takes you back to that time where time itself was an important part of telling a story. This feeling of instant gratification seems to be the dominant force when it comes to storytelling — and conversely, there's something innately mature and evolved about spending time with something. And I think that's what Brady does."

It seems to have worked. Suddenly, everyone wants to spend time with *The Brutalist*.

Thirteen minutes. That's how long the standing ovation was for *The Brutalist* at its Venice premiere. "The response was incredible," says Pearce. "And the applause just went on and on and on. After a while, I was thinking: 'Shit, I feel like we need to walk out of here now! Otherwise, they're just going to keep applauding until we leave.' I was trying to shuffle out of the room." And the buzz since that premiere back in September has only gotten louder. "We knew it was special," says Jones, "but it's still unexpected just how beloved it has been and how much people obviously need this kind of cinema."

"The response was so positive," adds Pearce. "But more than that, it's the fact it resonates and hopefully goes to another level. And that's what this film really does. It doesn't happen very often. It's rare. Brady is just quite a unique creature."

As largely positive as the responses are, specific interpretations about the film may vary. It is deliberately ambiguous in places, especially its ending, considering things like communism, capitalism, America, Israel, and the ongoing trauma of the Holocaust, and Corbet is reluctant to be drawn directly on what it could all mean. "All I hope for viewers to have is a cinematic experience and how they choose to interpret the film in terms of its poetry, in terms of its perceived politics. I think to be a strong filmmaker, you have to remain relatively agnostic about character, about allegory."

Ultimately, whether or not *The Brutalist* sweeps the Oscars this awards season — as some are predicting — this is a long film that should be around for a long time. "This is truly a story about everyone's sense of trying to belong," says Corbet. "I think that that mirrors the artistic experience." The hope is that the foundations here are strong enough to belong to history. 🍷

THE BRUTALIST IS IN CINEMAS FROM 24 JANUARY

STRUCTURAL INTEGRITY

BEAUTIFULLY BRUTALIST MOVIE LANDMARKS



GET CARTER (1971)

Gateshead's Trinity Square was officially the UK's best-loved Brutalist car park, thanks to its role in Mike Hodges' Michael Caine gangland classic. Sadly, this bleakly beautiful icon was demolished in 2010, despite protests from Sylvester Stallone (star of 2000's remake), who pleaded: "Please don't tear that thing down."



A CLOCKWORK ORANGE (1972)

The angular concrete shapes of east London's Thamesmead estate were a perfect match for Stanley Kubrick's dark satire. The grim, grey location, spotted by Kubrick in an architectural magazine, was designed as a utopian paradise, but soon gained a reputation for crime and violence — ideal for a near-future dystopia.



HIGH-RISE (2015)

The brutalism is practically built into the DNA of Ben Wheatley's adaptation of J.G. Ballard's thriller. Both book and film depict a tower block descending into chaos, the dismal surroundings sending its residents insane. Wheatley and his team used an abandoned leisure centre in Bangor, Northern Ireland, as the looming edifice.

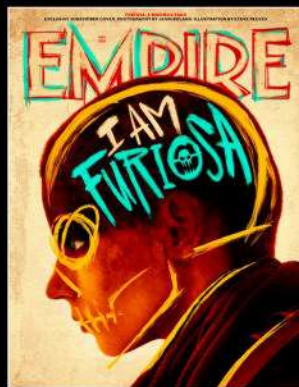
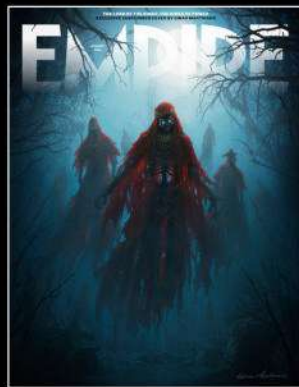
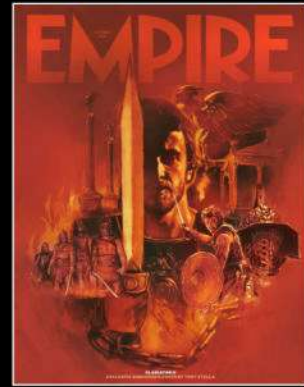
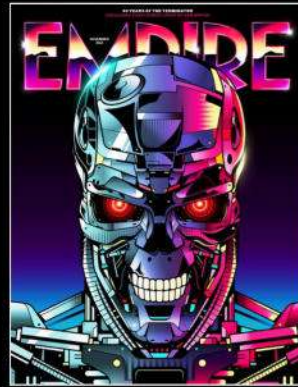
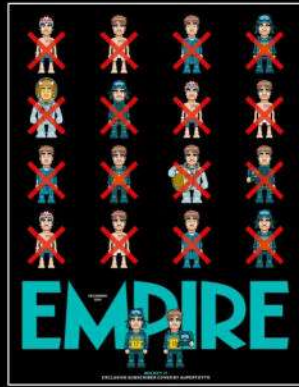
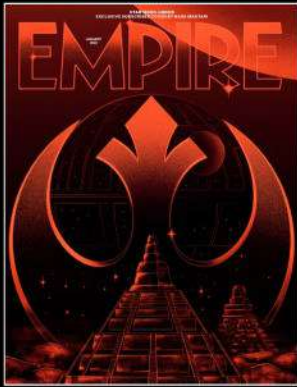


THE KITCHEN (2023)

Daniel Kaluuya and Kibwe Tavares' drama is set in London, 2044, using Brutalist architecture to tell an ominous story of inner-city urban decay and a community fighting back against the decline of social housing. Incongruously, it was largely shot at the Damiers complex in La Défense, Paris.

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REVIEW EMPIRE OF THE YEAR

WELL, 2024, YOU DID NOT DISAPPOINT: THERE HAS BEEN SOME TRULY VISIONARY CINEMA AND TELEVISION OVER THE PAST 12 MONTHS. AND *MADAME WEB*.

OVER THE NEXT 16 PAGES, WE CELEBRATE SOME OF WHAT DELIGHTED US THE MOST. THE NERVE-SHREDDING ACTION. THE SAD ROBOTS. THE SHITTING SASQUATCHES. STRAP IN...





THE MIGHTY WAR RIG

WORDS CHRIS HEWITT

FURIOSA: A MAD MAX SAGA

ONE OF THE interesting things about George Miller's *Furiosa* is how it feels, for much of its running (and driving) time, so utterly unlike its much-lauded predecessor. But for the film's third chapter, 'The Stowaway', Miller rides historic on the Fury Road once more, marshalling an astonishing sequence in which Furiosa (Anya Taylor-Joy), squirreled away on the War Rig as it makes its maiden run, finds herself forced to help defend it and its driver, Tom Burke's Praetorian Jack, from marauders. Filled with inventive beats that would make even the Octoboss gasp, it's one of the finest action sequences of the year, and here Miller tells *Empire* how he and his team pulled it off. Fire up the Bommy-Knocker!

THE STOWAWAY

"This sequence is character-driven. Furiosa starts off as a stowaway, and the whole sequence is a crash course in being a Road Warrior. She's shifting her role throughout. She starts underneath the vehicle, crawls [forward], goes to the front, interacts with people, gets into the cabin at a point where all the War Boys are gone, and it's only the two of them, and they have to help each other."

THE PLAN

"To start a sequence like that, you basically have it written in some form. I was lucky enough to work with my second-unit director Guy Norris, who was a young stuntman on

Mad Max 2. Along with one of his sons, Harrison, he got into developing a pre-vis system called Proxi, based on Unreal Engine. *Fury Road* was storyboarded in detail and when we were shooting it we were out in the desert in Namibia, and every morning we'd get into a huge tent, and all the stunt crews and the camera crews and everybody would stand around a big table with sand on it, and everybody had a pretty good mini-version of their vehicle or their camera vehicle, and there was a kind of a rehearsal. It was like kids playing in the sandbox with toys.

"That was done on this, but it was all pre-vis, and that's why we called it the Toy Box. What's great about this is, no matter how much you can play these things in your



THE STUNTS

"There was one shot which we did in one, where a bike with a pillion comes along and throws a thunderstick, which alerts the War Boys on top of the War Rig. They jump down to a little platform and throw some thundersticks, and then the pillion gets off the bike, and kind of water-skis behind the bike, and pulls a parachute and he goes up into the air while another parachutist, on the other side of the truck, is doing the same thing, and the camera swoops up with him. That was quite elaborate.

"And there was a moment where one of the War Boys on the fifth wheel between the cabin and the tanker is swiped and knocked off, and the guy falls forward onto the unguarded wheel of the tanker, and when he hits the wheel it spins him around. Now, I thought, 'We'll do that in motion capture and CG.' But Guy, in the rehearsals, said, 'We can do it.' It's done static, so the War Rig isn't moving. It's relatively easy to make tyres and road and landscape move in post. So the guy falls onto a wheel-shaped mat, bounces in the air, spins and lands on another mat on the road. The only bit we animated was the last little bit of him being pulled. I was really delighted by that, because it was real bodies, real physics, and that's what happens when you have a really good collaborative relationship. One of the tricks to visual effects is to make sure that at least the key element is in some way real.

"The thing that spun at the end of the War Rig, the thing we call the Bommy-Knocker, became more defined during the Toy Box process. There was something there originally, but it wasn't called the Bommy-Knocker, and it didn't work in that same way. It was actually Harrison who came up with the term. The moment I heard it, I said, 'I don't even know what it means, but it sounds right for this.'"

THE ROAD WARRIOR

"We shot the end sequence, where Praetorian Jack comes back and offers to teach Furiosa how to be a Road Warrior, at the end, at a place called Broken Hill, where we shot *Mad Max* all those years ago. That sequence was written that way, but the atmosphere of it arises out of the actors having gone through all of that, and having gone through a degree of exhaustion.

"We didn't say, 'We've got to do something that looks like *Fury Road*.' The thing loses its dramatic integrity if you think that. If you lifted this sequence out of the movie, I don't think you'd see the progression of Furiosa's character."



Clockwise from main: Rigging the Rig; Praetorian Jack (Tom Burke) and Furiosa (Anya Taylor-Joy) on a road trip to remember; The War Rig in its full glory.

head — and I'm pretty good at that, I have a good visual memory — you can't hold in your head all the moving parts. And by the time we got to shoot it, not only did every stunt person know where they'd be, but every camera. When you make these films, one of the big anxieties is safety. By the time you're shooting, you can shoot it very efficiently and with a high degree of control. That allows you to play around."

THE SHOOT

"The sequence was shot chronologically, and was second-unit for the most part. Guy was on a road in the flattest part of Australia called the Hay Plains. My memory was it took 78 days, which is a long time. But that was with rehearsal, and if they came to something more elaborate they might stop

for a day.

"For the first unit, we were on the road. But we had the back-up of a big tent where we could go in, depending on the weather, and shoot some close-ups. By the time we started shooting with the main unit, we had the bulk of the sequence done. So we could do all the material where Anya and Tom were engaged. Tom was determined to do a lot of his own stuff, and Anya was really exceptional. About three times Guy would play something for me and I'd say, 'Gee, Haley' — who was Anya's stunt double — 'looks like Anya'. And he would say to me, 'That is Anya.'"

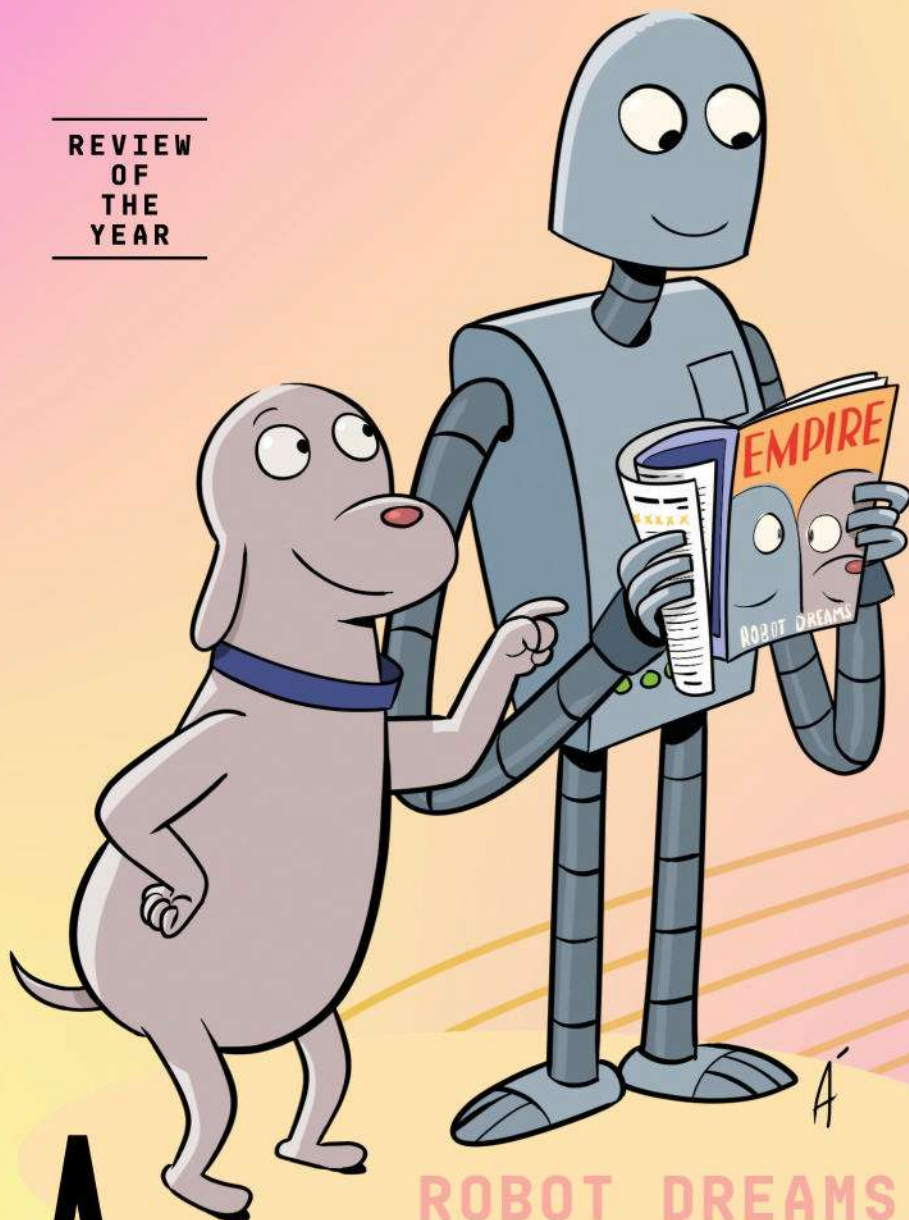


Illustration exclusively for *Empire* by *Robot Dreams*' art director, José Luis Ágreda. Note period-accurate logo!

amazing last tour concert for *Robot Dreams*. My closest collaborator — my wife — is Japanese as well. If I am the father, she is the mother of the film. And of course, my mother-in-law [is Japanese, and] she's so happy. And that's very important: to have the respect of your mother-in-law.

What did you connect with in Sara Varon's graphic novel?

Firstly, it's wordless. I collect wordless graphic novels and illustration books, so I just got it for my collection. When I got to the end of the book, I was so moved. The theme interested me, about the importance of relationships but especially the fragility of them, how we overcome loss, and how memory is a balm and probably one of the only ways to recover from loss.

The story takes place in a nondescript city in the graphic novel. Why did you choose to set the film in 1980s New York?

I lived in New York for ten years, so that part was very important for me. I fell in love in New York, and they broke my heart in New York, and I fell in love again. I think the story of *Robot Dreams* can be read as [about] a friendship, but it can also be read as a love story.

What was your highlight from taking *Robot Dreams* to the Oscars?

One month before the gala there's a luncheon with the nominees. When we got there, there was a photocall. My producers were talking to other producers so I was on the line by myself. I looked back, and there was Steven Spielberg. I said [to myself], "This is the only moment when I'm going to meet Steven Spielberg." The film that made me decide that I wanted to be a director was *Jaws*, which I saw when I was a kid. I told him the story and he asked what I was nominated for. Suddenly he said, "Oh, I'm going to see *Robot Dreams*!" [I thought,] "I'm having a conversation with Steven Spielberg!"

What has been your favourite reaction to the film?

A film journalist from Spain came up to me and said, "You saved my life." She was talking to me very seriously: "When your film came out, I had just [left] a long relationship with my boyfriend. I was devastated. I was Robot. And to see your film repeatedly, it really helped me." She started to cry and then she hugged me, and then we started laughing. She said, "I drove my therapist crazy talking about *Robot Dreams*."

A BEAUTIFUL RELATIONSHIP

WORDS BETH WEBB

UNTIL *ROBOT DREAMS*, Pablo Berger had stuck to live-action filmmaking (2003's *Torremolinos 73*, 2012's *Blancanieves*). Yet this story of a lonely dog who orders a robot companion, adapted from Sara Varon's 2007 graphic novel, struck such a profound and personal chord that it made him take the leap into animation. It was worth it: in 2024, *Robot Dreams* became globally revered and

Oscar-nominated. Speaking to *Empire*, Berger remembers the tears and triumphs of his whirlwind year.

***Robot Dreams* has had an incredible time, from being nominated for Best Animated Feature to travelling the world: it's only just come out in Japan. How has it all felt?** Japan felt like the cherry on top. What an

THE PENGUIN GOTHAM'S CUTTHROAT CRIME BOSS

WORDS **BETH WEBB**

IN A YEAR steeped in villainy, from Agatha Harkness to Art The Clown, it took a special breed of baddy to cut through the noise. Enter *The Penguin's* Sofia Falcone (Cristin Milioti), a hard-baked crime boss in sky-high heels and lashings of eyeliner. She has survived Arkham Asylum, defied countless enemies and gone toe-to-toe with Colin Farrell's ruthless Oz in a wretched game of cat-and-mouse. And she's emerged, if not a winner, a hero.

"The audience goes on a journey with her," showrunner Lauren LeFranc tells *Empire*. "We see what happened to Sofia in the past — what her father and family did to her — so Oz's betrayals in the present-day sting even more. And she doesn't just take it. She doesn't stay quiet. She stops hiding her scars and instead embraces them."

At the helm, Milioti is a revelation, at once a sinister and sympathetic presence. In turn she's rewarded with some of the show's best moments: a whimsical dance in a gas mask around her family home; a violent episode as Arkham swallows the final shreds of her former self; and taking a seat at the head of the Falcone table, draped in fur. "Cristin has brought humanity, humour and grit to everything Sofia says and does, and makes Sofia so damn compelling to watch," LeFranc enthuses.

LeFranc drew on Rosemary Kennedy, sister to John F., to help develop Sofia's backstory. "[She] was the forgotten Kennedy

daughter [who] came from a very wealthy family, was unruly and promiscuous and potentially mentally unstable, but it's hard to tell, because at that time women were put in insane asylums for hysteria," the showrunner explains. As for Sofia, given *The Penguin's* success, it seems nobody is in a rush to forget her. In fact, if Selina Kyle's message of support to her half-sister in the series finale is anything to go by, we'll be seeing a lot more of Sofia as Matt Reeves' *Batman* franchise continues to unfurl. Gotham has found a new reckoning.

Top to bottom: Sofia Falcone (Cristin Milioti) steps out; Incarcerated in Arkham; With Oz (Colin Farrell).



SORRY, WHAT?!

NICOLAS CAGE'S CHILLING
LONGLEGS DITTY



IF THERE'S ONE CATEGORY THAT THE OSCARS screws up time after time, it's Best Original Song. This is the category that completely overlooked 'Staying Alive' from *Saturday Night Fever*. If the Academy wishes to atone, they could do a lot worse than give the little gold guy to Osgood Perkins and Nicolas Cage for the song we're calling 'Longlegs' Lament (Theme From *Longlegs*). Yes, it's barely 20 seconds long. Yes, it consists of just a few lines. But if there's a bigger earworm this year, we haven't heard it. And for bonus points, it's fucking terrifying.

The song comes in a flashback, during which Lee Harker (Maika Monroe) recalls her first meeting with Cage's Satanic serial killer, Longlegs, when she was just a young girl. As he starts his big number, artfully framed so we only see his hands and the bottom of his face, Longlegs sings, "Let me in now, and it can be nice/Make me go now, and I'll have to come back/Not once, not twice, but as many times as I like."

But writing it down strips the song of its magic. Cage elongates the vowels until their breaking point, attacking the ditty like a demonic Robert Plant. The high note at the end could break glass, minds, and souls. Nominate it, Academy, if only for the joy of watching Cage perform it, in character, for a billion people. Not once, not twice, but as many times as he likes. **CHRIS HEWITT**



REVIEW
OF
THE
YEAR

DEMI MOORE TURNING INTO A MONSTER

THE SUBSTANCE

WORDS TERRI WHITE

FOR ALL THE headlines about freaking-out audiences fleeing screenings (yawnnn), *The Substance* will be remembered, celebrated, for Demi Moore's bold (bonkers) performance, and director Coralie Fargeat's blazing cinematic — and feminist — vision of the male gaze. One, she tells *Empire*, women “internalise, that becomes our jail”. And one that demanded creation of a “surreal, symbolic world”, in which Moore's 50-year-old ditched fitness-star Elisabeth, and younger, perter version Sue (Margaret Qualley) — expelled from her back after she shoots up youth serum — become monsters.

For Fargeat, that made practical effects a necessity. “She wanted that flesh-like quality,” says the man making it real, make-up and prosthetics designer Pierre-Olivier Persin. “It wasn't just a movie for Coralie, just a story, a character. It was coming from her guts.” And speaking of guts... here's how they created a monster fit for the wild world of *The Substance*.

UNLEASHING GOLEM

Golem is the end-stage of Elisabeth's accelerated ageing, everything shrivelling and hardening due to Sue's reckless behaviour. [Sue] is hyper-sexualised, drinking in “all the gazes on her body,” says Fargeat. “She feels that she's alive, that she has so much power.”

Elisabeth? Not so much. She quickly evolves from a heavily wrinkled woman chewing on a chicken carcass, to a fairy-tale-esque old crone, and ultimately a gnarly monster charging on all-fours. But that didn't mean tugging on the Old Gal tropes. “We loved the characters we were making,” insists Persin. “We were never making fun. We thought of them as beautiful, crazy.”

The plan was for Elisabeth to be Golem from the get-go (post-Sue shenanigans), until the designer urged restraint: “I thought it will spoil everything that's going to happen.” So light prosthetics on a half-aged face (what Persin called Requiem, “like *Requiem For A Dream*”), gave way to an (exhaustively

tested and modelled) finger dropping off, and finally, “completely heavy and hardcore” Golem, with Moore in full-body prosthetics, seven hours in the application.

THE ASCENSION OF MONSTRO

When Sue finds herself trapped by youth, as Elisabeth was by age, she misuses the Substance and Monstro is born. A creature built from Sue's body, Elisabeth's face and rejected beauty standards. But with film history full of *male* monsters, where to begin?

Early designs from an effects company were rejected — “They were really men designing a monster,” says Persin, who, not yet hired, spent evenings sculpting Monstro, inspired by the feminist sculptures of French artist Niki de Saint Phalle. Fargeat says she was playing with “this Picasso idea of having what the gazes look at every day — the boobs, the butts, the flesh — put in the shaker and rebalanced in an absurd way”. She wanted Monstro to “have this fat ass, all this cellulite

— the things we are not supposed to have”. She put her in a size-zero dress to show “she doesn’t care” and “explode” the representations girls are raised on.

And while the world sees a deformed creature, Monstro is content. Free at last of the male gaze, “the only gaze that matters is her own”, says Fargeat. “It’s the reconciliation between all the parts. The moment she reveals what’s inside her guts. What we are told to hide, be ashamed of, everything is out. And the butt is on the head, and the boobs are everywhere, and all those parts that have been fantasised [about], are kind of exploded. And she finally has some tenderness for herself.”

A tenderness found in one of the film’s most moving images — Monstro, cooing, putting on her earrings. “It’s that moment when she says, ‘Okay, I’m going to go outside in the world, I’m going to take my place on stage and say, I deserve to be here,’” says Fargeat. It’s on that stage — where Sue was due to host a NYE telecast — in front of a repulsed crowd, that Monstro literally loses her head. It explodes, gushing blood.

The head, says Persin, went through “many, many designs” and was inspired “in a subconscious way by *The Elephant Man*.”

And that river of blood — some 30,000 gallons — flowing in the aftermath had a point to make. As did Fargeat. “It was a symbolic way of saying, ‘If you don’t want to see me for who I am, if you don’t want to change — make a systemic change — this is what you deserve. To be crushed by blood. Because this is the monster you’ve created. This is the violence that comes from you.’”

THE BLOB BREAKS FREE

There’s no river of blood wide enough to stop Elisabeth, though. And the film’s final sequence reveals what’s left: a sloppy pile of viscera, her face a-top. What Persin calls “the Blob”. All VFX, surely?

“We built a puppet!” he says — one operated from underneath, to capture movement. VFX then filled out the flesh. And the final iteration — Elisabeth’s face that ups and toddles off to her star on the Walk Of Fame — was created from scans of Moore crying and laughing.

For the director, one of the most important messages was “the only liberation the character can have is totally destroying herself”. And while Fargeat says this destruction is “for real, for many of us”, and while we watch Elisabeth’s face be casually swept away for good, it’s not as bleak as first watch would suggest.

Fargeat insists Elisabeth’s “reunion” with her star is “a real liberation moment. She wants to be at her place. To say, ‘I still deserve to have my name, my star.’ And when she looks [up] at the stars, she has her glory moment. Even if she’s mush on the pavement, she’s happy.”



THE YEAR OF PRIMATES

IN 2024, CINEMA WENT SIMIAN



KINGDOM OF THE PLANET OF THE APES

It’s the franchise that keeps on giving. Fifty-six years and God knows how many films on, the chatty apes returned, with Owen Teague’s eager young Noa going up against Kevin Durand’s absolute bastard Proximus Caesar. Apes... Together... (Box-office) strong.



GLADIATOR II

Let us discuss — applaud, in fact — whoever decided to not just give Fred Hechinger’s Emperor Caracalla a fabulous pet monkey called Dondus, but have Caracalla name him consul. Dondus ruled — not, ultimately, the Roman Empire, but definitely our hearts and minds.



BETTER MAN

The wildest swing this year, though, was having a CG chimp play Robbie Williams. Yes, the ones in *Kingdom Of The Planet Of The Apes* were fluent, but could they dazzle 125,000 people while singing ‘Let Me Entertain You’? No they could not. **ALEX GODFREY**



REVIEW
OF
THE
YEAR

THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE RINGS OF POWER

A RED-HOT SHOWDOWN

WORDS HELEN O'HARA

ONE OF THE most spectacular TV moments of the year saw an elderly Scottish Dwarf attempting to absolutely munter a Balrog. After spending Season 2 of *The Lord Of The Rings: The Rings Of Power* in thrall to a magical ring, getting too greedy and delving too deep into the Mines Of Moria, Peter Mullan's King Durin III redeems himself with a glorious finish. He sets things right with his son (Owain Arthur) and makes a doomed final stand against one of Middle-earth's baddest bads — said Balrog — to save his people. We asked Mullan to talk us through the year's hottest melee...

What excited you about playing Durin III in the first place?

Originally when it was filming in New Zealand, my partner's there in New Zealand,

so that was the main appeal. And I thought it would be fun, the fact that the Dwarves were all going to be Scottish. It's important for young Scots kids to watch big-budget stuff, and hear their own accents back at them. It was good fun, although getting into the make-up, that's very tricky, because you're in a chair at 3:30 am, and you don't get out the chair 'til 7:30 am. It gets very claustrophobic. There were days where I found myself sitting there feeling a bit sorry for myself. And you think, "Come on, you're not working down the mine." And then I realised I *was* working down a fucking mine. Actually, I can feel sorry for myself!

When did the showrunners, J.D. Payne and Patrick McKay, tell you about Durin's send-off?

They're very secretive with all that stuff. [On

Season 1] J.D. told me the story, because I hadn't even seen a script. He finished, and I said, "You never mentioned how I die." And he said, "Oh no, no, no, no, I'm not going to kill you. We'll do that next time." When we did the second season, I literally only found out weeks before we shot it. I had no clue. I didn't know the name of the thing that killed me.

What was your experience of shooting the sequence?

You're on this big set, and there's a whole stream of flashing lights. I got quite lucky because at least I got something that intimidated what was going to happen. It wasn't the classic man-with-a-tennis-ball-on-a-stick. I was killed by a bunch of disco lights! But what made it really easy for me

SORRY, WHAT?!

MADAME WEB'S PEPSI CAMEOS



PEPSI HAS BEEN SHAMELESSLY HAWKED IN movies before. In *Cobra*, Sylvester Stallone's cop lives in an apartment with a giant neon Pepsi sign on its side. *World War Z* even turns into an extended ad for the soda, a cure-carrying Brad Pitt pausing to swig from a can, then deploying other ones to distract zombies. Yes, Pepsi literally saves the world.

How do you top that? Well, you fizz up a superhero. Early in *Madame Web*, Dakota Johnson's titular spider-lady is at a BBQ when she's handed a can. For the next 55 seconds, she proceeds to fiddle with the pull tab, glancing at it, almost opening it on several occasions... but never quite doing it. It's mesmerising. Maddening. Frankly, it provokes more emotion than the rest of the film put together. OPEN THE CAN, MADAME WEB!

Alas, she never does. And given her only reaction to the beverage is to ask if she can have a beer instead, it may not be the most successful bit of product placement. At least she makes up for it in the climax, which unfolds next to a giant metal Pepsi sign (*Cobra* would be jealous), its 'P' used to crush the main villain. Hooray for murder-cola? Now, if you'll excuse us, writing this has been thirsty work... we're off to have a cool, refreshing Coke.

NICK DE SEMLYEN



Clockwise from main: Balrog v. Durin IV; Peter Mullan as the plucky Dwarf; A fiery finish.

was Owain and Sophia [Nomvete, as Durin IV's wife Disa]. They had to do all the crying-acting. That was quite cool, because you find out how much your fellow actors love you. If they don't fucking cry a lot, you can get quite upset. So I hung around just to make sure that they were crying properly, which they both did, because they're very beautiful people.

So how much of the action was you swinging about in a harness, and how much was handed over to a stuntman?

There was no harness. I didn't get to do any jumping. They put you in the big machine and do all the digital scanning, and then you pull all these faces and do all these hand movements, and they put that in.

How was your relationship with Owain? Your characters butt heads all season but then have this really tender final scene.

He's such a sweetheart. When I arrived in New Zealand, he'd already been working on his accent, and he was terrified about an actual Scot being there, like I was gonna go around like some fucking voice Nazi, which I would never do. Their accents were lovely. Owain and I are really close. We ended up doing all that father/son stuff, and it was really sweet.

What was your reaction when you saw the sequence?

It made me laugh. It's good fun, all that bollocks. I struggle to take all the fantasy stuff seriously, but it's lovely to see that big, heroic ending for that wee guy.

REVIEW
OF
THE
YEAR

SUPACELL

A HEROIC VICTORY

WORDS ALEX GODFREY

Top to bottom:
Superpowered
South Londoners
assemble; The eyes
have it: Sabrina
Clarke (Nadine
Mills); Director
Rapman on set.

AFTER RELEASING HIS London crime drama *Blue Story* in 2019, writer/director Rapman knew what he wanted to do next: a TV show about a group of Black people who develop superpowers. But unlike cinema's super-worlds, this would be different. There would be no heroes here, as such: this would be a grounded show, about regular people who wouldn't quite know how to handle their burgeoning powers, using them just to get through the day. And these powers would all be connected to sickle cell, the genetic blood disorder that predominantly affects Black people. Rapman was confident that he was onto a good thing, but had no idea how the show would be embraced once it hit Netflix on 27 June. He takes us through his wild few months.

THE RECEPTION

"When it got released that Friday, I was in LA and I was just nervous. I was refreshing Twitter as soon as the show came on at midnight. And once the weekend was over, I knew it was a hit because Twitter was going crazy about it. My phone went crazy. My agents' phones went crazy. The reaction was wild, and when the [positive] press started coming out, I felt so relieved. It was nerve-racking, because I'd been gone for five years: *Blue Story* was 2019, so I didn't even know if my core audience would still be interested in my work. But after four days, we were the number two show on Netflix, just under *Bridgerton*. And then the following week, we smashed *Bridgerton* off and we were number one in the world."



THE PROMO

"For the UK, I'd done much of it before. I've done a lot of UK press in the past, so I've now done *Good Morning Britain* four or five times. I've got a good relationship with Susanna Reid, that's my G there. But doing American press, that was weird, because I never thought they would take to *Supacell*. It's such a specific [London-based] show. [New York radio show] *The Breakfast Club*, I grew up listening to [host] Charlamagne for years, so when I went on there and he told me *Supacell* had him in a choke-hold, I was like, 'This is crazy.' Seeing it be embraced outside of the UK was so nice."

THE CAST

"My cast, they're like my family, man. They're like my little brothers and sisters. From day one of the read-through I told them, 'Your lives are gonna change.' Nadine Mills, who plays Sabrina, she had 1,000 followers on Instagram, and by the time the show was over, she was on 70,000. She's on magazine covers. She was a teacher, she was doing acting classes from a young age and never could land a role. Josh Tedeku [Tazer] has done quite a lot of TV, he was always going to be a star, but I told him, 'This is going to be your moment.' And Tosin Cole [Michael] has been on our screens for years but never had his actual big moment — now he can't walk the streets anymore, and he's just about to do a massive movie. So it makes me feel so proud, because I'm a part of their journey forever now."

THE COMMUNITY

"The biggest thing for me [about the show's reach] was the sickle cell community. I never knew how passionate they were to be seen, to have their story told. I wrote it into the show, thinking that this disease had never had this sort of attention on it, so I was just like, 'I want to put something out on this.' But it was crazy. They flew me to Atlanta to receive a sickle cell awareness award. That community, it's so big and they were so appreciative — they can sit down with their family members like, 'Oh, you don't understand sickle cell? Here, go watch the show.' I'm so happy I can be a part of helping them."

THE FUTURE

"I got a call from the boss lady [at Netflix], saying, 'You want to do it again?' I write as a viewer. I can tell you every single scene of every single episode, and Season 2 really is the next step forward. I always do what I believe is true to myself and for a viewer like me. But I can't wait for the world to get it. My goal for the first season was for the world to love it, and now I get a chance to do it again. And with all I now know about TV... Season 2 is going to blow Season 1 out of the water."



Top to bottom: Events get hairy for the Sasquatch family; Riley Keough's Female gets the breast milk squirting; Jesse Eisenberg's Male gets the wee flowing.



WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

You'd think that, over 100 years, cinema would have exhausted all its possibilities. That there is nothing new for filmmakers to show us. All roads have been well and truly travelled.

Well, all roads except for one. The one that a family of Sasquatches — Jesse Eisenberg's Male, Riley Keough's Female, and Christophe Zajac-Denek's Child, all in full-body make-up — stumble upon in *Sasquatch Sunset*. Freaked out and fucked up by the black strip of concrete that has cut a swathe through their Pacific Northwest paradise, they do what comes naturally. They defy the gods and mark their territory, grunting and howling and hollering as they cover the road in rivers of piss, piles of poo and — the *coup de grâce* — breast milk, shot out of Keough's hairy hooters at a rate of knots.

It's shocking, scatological, screamingly funny, and even profound. It is also something nobody has ever put on screen before. At the very least, this didn't happen in *Bigfoot And The Hendersons*.

"We knew at some point they needed to encounter human civilisation," says David Zellner, who wrote and directed with his brother, Nathan. "And something about the road seemed like a really interesting way to

THE BODILY-FLUID BONANZA

SASQUATCH
SUNSET

do it. We loved that feeling, going through the full range of emotions from fear and confusion to anger and dominance. It's kinda like their 2001 monolith."

As for all the bodily fluids, David was inspired by seeing his dogs and cats do much the same thing. "We wanted to be completely unfiltered," he explains, "but we never wanted anything to be a spoof. If that's all it was, it would get old really quick. It was a high-wire act, trying to pull it off."

How they pulled it off: they shot on a real road in Humboldt County, "a logging road they make to drive deep into the forest", explains Nathan. All the fluids were funnelled through tubes, later painted out in post, and meticulously made by production designer Michael Powsner. "There were chocolate and oatmeal combinations," laughs Nathan. "They had to be solid enough to feel solid but still able to be pushed through tubes with an air cannon. We wanted that sweet spot."

Early word was, when the film debuted at Sundance in January, that this scene caused several walkouts. Not so, says Nathan. "At the premiere at Sundance, after the road scene, people were giving it an ovation," he says. "People really like that scene." No shit.

REVIEW
OF
THE
YEAR

THE DESERT DUEL

DUNE: PART TWO

WORDS JAMES DYER

DUNE: PART TWO'S climactic showdown sees Paul Atreides, *Timothée Chalamet's* messianic hero, cross blades with *Austin Butler's* pallid Harkonnen, *Feyd-Rautha*, as the sun rises over the desert. Director *Denis Villeneuve* breaks down the vicious confrontation.

"There's something about knife-fights in particular that's very frightening. And real knife-fights are very short. The shorter, the more dangerous. Battles in cinema often become fight porn — they're too long and it doesn't mean anything so they lose your attention. I try to create fights that are short, strong bursts of violence so you never lose the intensity. You want to be as economical

as possible and just feel the brutality.

"I wanted this battle to happen at the end of the night so you'd have the birth of a new world with a new dawn. Plus, I love those skies when the sun is reddish and you have that morning atmosphere. The bright-orange sun brings something very dramatic, silhouetting the scene, and I asked Patrice Vermette, my production designer, to make a set with a huge opening that allows us to see it and to stay in contact with the desert.

We follow the emotional journey of each of the characters through this scene. There's Paul's mother [*Rebecca Ferguson*] watching her son fight. You have Gurney [*Josh Brolin*], Paul's trainer, watching his oldest friend close to death. And for the Fremen, their

religious figure, the Mahdi, is facing death. For Irulan [*Florence Pugh*], her father could lose the throne or be killed. For everybody, the stakes cannot be higher.

"But the secret to this is Chani [*Zendaya*]. The whole movie was written so we would land on that scene and understand that Chani feels politically betrayed by Paul. We follow Paul through the fight, but we are always close to Chani's perspective, which is tremendously important because we need to understand here at the end of the movie that this story is not a celebration of Paul Atreides. It's a warning against people that use religion as a political tool. Jon Spaihts and I wrote this screenplay to be faithful to Frank Herbert's initial desire, which was to

THE YEAR OF NUNS

THIS YEAR, CINEMA GOT BACK IN THE HABIT



I like the fact that Feyd, despite all his viciousness, still has a moral code, and honour is important to him.

"The fight itself shows the clash of two cultures: Feyd uses the Harkonnen technique, Paul the Atreides technique cross-mixed with the Fremen. The more the fight evolves, the more Paul starts to fight like a Fremen in order to survive. Towards the end, he's using techniques that Jamis [Babs Olusanmokun] used against him in the first film. Roger Yuan, the choreographer, uses combat as a language and I love that.

"At this point, Paul is the incarnation of the Kwisatz Haderach. He has The Sight and sees different paths into the future. He sees that he has to get very close to death. He needs his opponent to feel safe and to get very close to him. And at the moment when his opponent thinks Paul is about to die, that's the window where he knows he will have the chance to kill him. That moment, where he stabs Feyd, is an echo of the fight with Gurney in the first film. The fights all mirror each other and have little echoes or footnotes from one fight to the other, so it's like a puzzle that gets its resolution at the end here. Roger Yuan is a poet.

"Timothy and Austin trained for this fight for months because I wanted real speed to it. The only thing I had to design myself was where Paul would fall after being stabbed. I wanted him to be very close to Chani and far away from the Emperor. Once he kills Feyd-Rautha, I wanted us to feel that proximity with Chani as being kind of the last temptation of Christ — the last moment where Paul could have said, 'You know what? Fuck it!' and gone back to Chani. I wanted to see in her eyes that this is their last chance. She opens her heart and says to him, 'Please stay with me. Don't do this.' But Paul knows that the only way he can protect his people is to cross this room and leave her behind.

"Honestly, every time I watch the movie and their eyes meet in that silent exchange, at the precise moment when he stands up and removes the knife... The way Paul looks at Chani breaks my heart. Timothée did an amazing job there. And then he crosses the room, and as he walks, he leaves his vulnerability behind and becomes a titan. He becomes a figure that is larger than life. He becomes Paul Muad'Dib."

make it a cautionary tale.

"What makes the fight interesting is that Paul and Feyd-Rautha are a mirror of each other. Both at the top of their game. The difference is Paul is exhausted. He's just come from a huge fight and then this arrogant, fresh, strong, young fighter comes out and defies him. I wanted to feel the difference in energy between both characters and to make sure that we fear for Paul's safety. Paul fights for survival — he knows that if he wins he will win the empire, the Fremen will survive and he will be able to get power. But Feyd-Rautha is vicious and more of a playboy. He's doing this for pleasure, to humiliate Paul. In the book, Feyd is a bit more of a coward and he uses tricks, but

Above:
Let battle commence: Paul Atreides (Timothée Chalamet) meets his match in Feyd-Rautha (Austin Butler).



THE FIRST OMEN

This prequel to 1976's *The Omen* tells us how the Antichrist came to be. Neill Tiger Free stars as Sister Margaret, an American who has moved to Rome to become a nun, finding work at an orphanage. She then gets caught up in Satanic rituals, as you do, and her faith is tested. Don't forget your rosary.



IMMACULATE

In 2024's *other* nun-becomes-pregnant-amid-religious-conspiracy horror, Sydney Sweeney's novice nun Sister Cecilia is hailed as the next Virgin Mary. For promo, the actor watched the film with some actual female pastors: "Never seen a nun break another nun's leg before," commented one.



PADDINGTON IN PERU

In the fluffy little bear's third outing, Olivia Colman plays the Reverend Mother, a singing, dancing, smiling, quietly scheming sister who (spoiler alert) may not have taken her vows of poverty and obedience. Hard stare!

JOHN NUGENT

REVIEW
OF
THE
YEAR

SHOGUN THE ULTIMATE SAMURAI EPIC

WORDS JAMES DYER



SEPPUKU, POETRY, WEAPONISED etiquette, and sacrificing your life for the sake of a decomposing pheasant — such are the unlikely elements of this year's breakout TV hit. A largely subtitled, 90 per cent Japanese-language series about subtle politicking for control of 17th-century Japan, *Shōgun* took the building blocks of James Clavell's 1975 novel and, shaking off the memory of Richard Chamberlain's 1980s miniseries, constructed an enthralling, labyrinthine and yet surprisingly accessible ten-part drama charting the dawn of the country's Edo period.

With its complex codes of conduct and delicate, knotty political manoeuvrings, *Shōgun* feels entirely alien to modern, Western audiences, dropping viewers into the cultural deep-end as surely as it does Cosmo Jarvis' cocksure English sailor, John Blackthorne. But, like Blackthorne, we're

swiftly drawn in by the Byzantine machinations of proud *daimyo* Toranaga (Hiroyuki Sanada), and his determined, yet tragic vassal Mariko (Anna Sawai) as they navigate the country's traditional isolationism, the spread of Portuguese Catholicism, and the dangerous power-struggle brewing among the country's council of regents.

Off the back of *Shōgun*'s success (which includes 18 Emmys), this limited series has been reconceived as an ongoing concern, with second and third seasons currently in pre-production. We spoke to co-showrunners Rachel Kondo and Justin Marks about their journey here, and the path ahead.

Congratulations on being *Empire*'s show of the year. Has it been a long, hard road getting here?

Justin Marks: Honestly, we've gotten to a point where I'm hearing those words "show

of the year", and all I can picture is sitting in the woods, waist-deep in mud. No-one thought we'd be here.

Rachel Kondo: No-one!

Marks: What they never tell you, and what I've learned over 20 years, is that the feeling of failure and of success is exactly the same.

Kondo: So you better enjoy the work because that's all you're going to get. So "show of the year" is amazing, but it's also a little bit mind-blowing because we know the other side of it.

***Shōgun* has been a breakout hit, which is quite the achievement when you consider that it's politically dense, 90 per cent in Japanese, and feels as much a fantasy to modern audiences as *Game Of Thrones*.**

Marks: In a strange way, in spite of its different language and no dragons, there's something quaint about this world where the rules are different from ours and where people

Clockwise from main:
The warlord: Lord Yoshii Toranaga (Hiroyuki Sanada); The go-between: Toda Mariko (Anna Sawai); The ship's navigator: John Blackthorne (Cosmo Jarvis).



metaphors and poetry and great characters, and also every now and then a head will roll.

Kondo: And we live that high and low.

Marks: Right. Rachel's taste growing up was refined British romance and my taste was *Star Wars* and science-fiction. It was a kind of world-building that I think is very busy, but also works on the level of a child.

Kondo: We enjoyed searching for that balance. Who wants to stay in the politics for too long? You've got to have those quiet little stories like Uejirou, the gardener who gave his life for the rotting bird. You've got to have those stories because that's truer to life.

James Clavell wrote a number of other books set in Asia but only ever one with these characters. You're already working on Seasons 2 and 3 but there's no roadmap now. Have you found it easier having the freedom to chart your own course?

Marks: It's so much harder.

Kondo: Thank goodness we're doing this more difficult part for the second season, because what we're more comfortable with this time around is the creative chaos of it all. Whereas in the beginning, that chaos was disorienting and daunting. We're still daunted, but we know at some point, things fall into place. We hope.

Marks: We're almost done with our first real break to the end of what the story is. I'm so grateful for the foundation that Clavell established. There are always these moments where we're like, "What are we missing?" You just pick up the book and it's like, "Oh, this guy. I forgot about this guy. We never used this guy in the first season." I am so excited by what we've been coming up with.

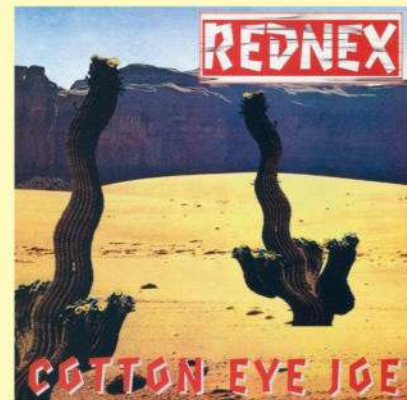
operate in a way that we don't understand at first. But it feels like the leaders in this world especially have a dignity that makes sense to us — even though it's a world where people get their heads cut off for seemingly no reason. Toranaga is what we all wish we could be, in a certain way. And Mariko. I think these are people who stand for things that feel really heroic. There's something refreshing about the simplicity of that — and they have a strong dignity that *boy*, do we need right now!

The culture clash, not to mention the political wrangling, is a lot for audiences to process. Did you worry about making it sufficiently accessible?

Marks: What Clavell wrote in the '70s was a pop epic, the kind of book that is simultaneously dense and daunting, and really accessible. It's this mix of high and low. It's got these high-minded themes and

SORRY, WHAT?!

COTTON EYE JOE'S CINEMATIC COMEBACK



AH, REDNEX. WHAT A BAND. OR WERE THEY? It's hard to say. 'Cotton-Eyed Joe' is a traditional American folk song, meaning: nobody knows who the hell wrote it, so the doors are open for any cover-version, cost-free. Enter Rednex, a Swedish pop outfit who, in 1994, retitled it 'Cotton Eye Joe' and Eurodanced it all to hell, taking the fiddles to 132 BPM. As infectious as it was irritating, it hit the number-one spot in many countries that didn't know better, and lodged itself in everyone's brains like a banjo-playing earworm. But its cultural impact waned. UNTIL NOW.

The Lord (of Europop) works in mysterious ways. Not one, but two excellent films this year, James Watkins' *Speak No Evil* and Andrea Arnold's *Bird*, enthusiastically catapulted Rednex's song firmly into 2024. In *Speak No Evil* (below), James McAvoy's terrifying toxic bastard Paddy physically and mentally bullies his son Ant (Dan Hough) for not dancing well enough to 'Cotton Eye Joe' at an enforced garden hoedown. In *Bird*, the song is used more positively, as the basis for a joyful line-dancing sequence at a wedding — it brings tears to the eyes, and a big old grin to the mouth.

These dual instances represent the yin and yang of Rednex's contribution to society: it is possibly a hate crime, but also, well, you kinda gotta love it. Until next time, you Swedish maniacs.

ALEX GODFREY



REVIEW
OF
THE
YEAR

FILMS OF THE YEAR

AS VOTED FOR BY TEAM *EMPIRE*, HERE ARE
2024'S FINEST SLICES OF CINEMA

1

ALL OF US STRANGERS

Andrew Haigh's beautifully melancholic drama tells the story of lonely writer Adam (Andrew Scott), who revisits his childhood home and begins a new relationship with the ghosts of his parents (Jamie Bell and Claire Foy). Alongside that, he strikes up another relationship, with the equally lonely Harry (Paul Mescal). Even though it was released back in January, we're still smitten, and still crying: Team Empire, taking in our editorial staff and regular contributors, have overwhelmingly voted it as the best film of the

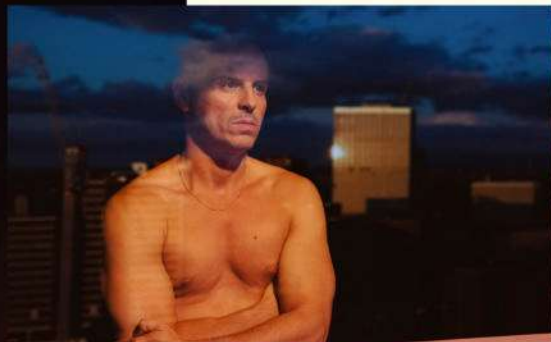
year. We spoke to Haigh about All Of Us Strangers' ever-growing impact.

"This is so cool. I've read *Empire* literally since it first came out. The idea that I could ever be even involved in film, let alone be a director, was so out of my imagination, so it's very cool to now be here. I appreciate it. When I made the film, I was never sure if it would find an audience. So it's been the biggest joy that it has found that audience, and continually finds that audience. The fact that people still even talk about it a year later is really meaningful. It really seems to have resonated. You can't ask for any more than that. It's pretty exciting that it's number one after all this time.

"I'm not a particularly extroverted person, and the fact that there is now this kind of personal story about me out there, I've found that a little

bit hard. It's taken me, actually, a little bit of time to deal with that. Even the fact that I shot it in my [old] house. But the want of most filmmakers is to be able to say something about how they see and understand the world, and allow that out into the world, to resonate with other people. So it is really quite a powerful thing, when you are sharing your own personal philosophy of life, and something based on some element of personal experience, and then have that speak to other people. And I can't tell you how many people have come to me to tell me their own stories, whether it's about losing a parent, or whether it's about growing up gay, or whether it's just about feeling alone in the world. That feels special.

"If a piece of art can make you feel less alone, even if it's desperately sad and melancholy, if it allows you to feel like, 'Oh my God, I am not the only one that suffers in the world' — that's a very



Clockwise from main: Harry (Paul Mescal) and Adam (Andrew Scott); Adam ponders; Harry wonders; Adam with Dad (Jamie Bell) and Mum (Claire Foy); Writer-director Andrew Haigh.

powerful thing, because we often don't express how we feel, even to those who are closest to us. And art can tap into that shared loneliness that we all experience in the world. It's also quite unusual sometimes: I've been in places and someone will start talking about the film and they'll start crying. That's quite a powerful thing to have to experience. Sometimes you don't know what to do. You're sort of, 'Okay...' Pat them on the shoulder. 'I'm sorry for you...' I literally could not have asked for more for this film. It's more than I ever dreamed." **ALEX GODFREY**



2 THE ZONE OF INTEREST

Jonathan Glazer's drama about the evil of detachment is still reverberating.



3 THE HOLDOVERS

Paul Giamatti and Alexander Payne reunited, and it felt so good.



4 CHALLENGERS

The sweatiest, sexiest and most scornful tennis we've ever witnessed.



5 ANORA

This giddy, gonzo Cinderella story has it all.



6 ROBOT DREAMS

In which a dog befriends a robot and we sob forever.



7 THE SUBSTANCE

An unforgettable shock to the system. All hail Monstro Elisaeus!



8 POOR THINGS

Yorgos Lanthimos and Emma Stone, we don't deserve you.



9 DUNE: PART TWO

You'll believe a man can ride (a sandworm).



10 PERFECT DAYS

Wim Wenders' beautifully serene paean to routine.



11 I SAW THE TV GLOW

Intoxicating neon magic from Jane Schoenbrun.



12 LOVE LIES BLEEDING

A queer noir on steroids. Literally.



13 LA CHIMERA

Josh O'Connor: Tomb Raider.



14 HIT MAN

Starring Glen Powell. And Glen Powell. And Glen Powell.



15 HUNDREDS OF BEAVERS

Slapstick and video-game visuals in a tasty beaver-stew.



16 CONCLAVE

Stressful pontificating about a pontiff.



17 A DIFFERENT MAN

Adam Pearson steals the show in an absurdist identity-bender.



18 CIVIL WAR

A full-on cinematic assault that left us shaken.



19 FURIOSA

You'll believe a woman can ride (eternal).



20 KNEECAP

Loveable Irish hip-hop hooligans bring the noise.

TV SHOWS OF THE YEAR

THE BIGGEST THINGS ON THE SMALLER SCREEN



1 SHŌGUN

2 SUPACELL

3 INDUSTRY

4 THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE RINGS OF POWER

5 3 BODY PROBLEM

6 THE DAY OF THE JACKAL

7 RIVALS

8 SLOW HORSES

9 INTERVIEW WITH THE VAMPIRE

10 TRUE DETECTIVE: NIGHT COUNTRY

11 RIPLEY

12 THE PENGUIN

13 ARCANE

14 SHERWOOD

15 BABY REINDEER

16 HOUSE OF THE DRAGON

17 DOCTOR WHO

18 WE ARE LADY PARTS

19 BLACK DOVES

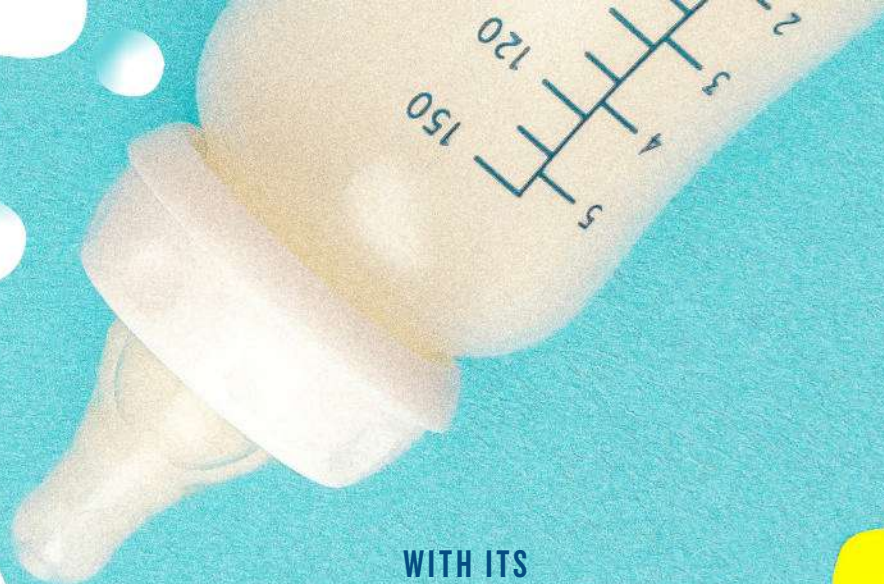
20 X-MEN '97

Going Gaga

WITH ITS
SPEAKING SPERM
AND BLABBERING BABIES,
LOOK WHO'S TALKING
CAME FROM NOWHERE
TO BECOME ONE OF
THE BIGGEST —
AND WEIRDEST
— ROMCOMS
OF ALL TIME.

THIRTY-FIVE
YEARS ON,
DIRECTOR
AMY
HECKERLING
TELLS *EMPIRE*
ABOUT THE
CHAOTIC MAKING
OF THE
“MOST PROFITABLE
PRIVATE JOKE
EVER”

WORDS
TOM
ELLEN







Amy Heckerling's first thought was: "Oh no."

It was the winter of 1985, and the Bronx-born filmmaker was eating breakfast at the kitchen table with her husband. Across from them, burbling away happily in a high-chair, sat their baby daughter, Mollie. "She was looking at us, we were looking at her," Heckerling recalls, nearly four decades later. "Suddenly, me and my husband started ad-libbing things she might be thinking." As the sleep-deprived new parents amused themselves by improvising their child's inner monologue, something occurred to Heckerling: "In my mind, I was like: 'Oh no. This is gonna be my next movie...'"

"Oh no" because the concept of 'talking babies' seemed, the director tells *Empire*, "kinda hokey. Family-oriented and cute — and I don't feel like that's me." This, after all, was the woman who'd made her debut three years earlier with the weed-and-sex-fuelled teen romp *Fast Times At Ridgemont High*. "I'd rather do *A Clockwork Orange* than talking babies," Heckerling says today. "But this was the idea I had."

That idea, conjured bleary-eyed at breakfast, would become *Look Who's Talking* — an ultra-high-concept romcom blending grounded themes (pregnancy, adultery) with goofy slapstick and avant-garde invention (breast-milk spit-takes! Wiscracking sperm!). On its release in October 1989, the tale of single mum Mollie (Kirstie Alley), her shambling love interest James (John Travolta) and her 'talking baby' Mikey (whose inner thoughts are voiced by Bruce Willis) was a surprise mega-hit, netting nearly \$300 million against its \$7.5 million budget, trumping such other "family-oriented" behemoths as *Honey, I Shrunk The Kids* and *Ghostbusters II* at the box office, and spawning two sequels and a spin-off TV show.

The movie also reinvigorated Travolta's career, handing the actor his biggest hit since 1978's *Grease*, and paving the way for his '90s resurgence. For Heckerling, too, its success was a potent shot in the arm. "I was kind of in the 'girl ghetto' [before *Look Who's Talking*]," she laughs. "Making low-budget 'girl' movies. I had friends who were boys — John Landis, Harold Ramis, Martin Brest — and their movies made a lot of money. I used to call them 'boy hits'. I didn't want to have a 'girl hit' — I wanted a 'boy hit'!"

In the end, she got something even bigger. She got a baby hit.



HECKERLING'S PERSONAL LIFE MAY HAVE been flourishing as she gazed adoringly at her daughter across that kitchen table in 1985, but professionally, she was in a slump.

Since *Fast Times...* hit in 1982 — branded a "scuz-pit" by critic Roger Ebert, but immediately beloved by teens worldwide — the director's experiences in Hollywood had been middling. Her 1984 follow-up, gangster spoof *Johnny Dangerously*, had underperformed commercially, and she'd endured a "miserable" time making Chevy Chase comedy *National Lampoon's European Vacation* a year later. "It was a trainwreck," she tells us, over Zoom from her New York home. "It was impossible, and some of the people I had to work with were impossible. [During production] I'd call the studio head and say, 'I want to come home. You should find someone else to do this — a monkey could direct this better than I could.'" When the movie came out — with no simian assistance — in summer 1985, it was greeted by withering reviews. By that point, though, Heckerling had other things on her mind. "I was pregnant," she beams. "I was about to have my fuckin' baby."

Said fuckin' baby inspired that 'Oh no' moment at breakfast a few months later, and suddenly Heckerling had the idea that might give her flagging career a much-needed boost. "I thought, 'Oh fuck, I gotta do this,'" she says. "But now I gotta figure out a plot for it."

She didn't have to look far. The story she conjured — that of a young woman who gets pregnant by a married man — would have struck most of Heckerling's peers as imaginative invention. But in fact, it was wholly autobiographical. For, unbeknown to nearly everyone, baby Mollie was not actually the biological daughter of Heckerling's husband, Neal — but rather of actor, director and *Ghostbuster* Harold Ramis, with whom Heckerling had had a brief affair. As both she and Ramis were in relationships, they chose to keep Mollie's paternity a secret — from her and the general public. It was only in 2018 that the truth became known, following the publication of a memoir by Ramis' first daughter, Violet. ("You know that married asshole that gets Kirstie Alley's character pregnant and won't leave his wife?" Violet recalls Ramis telling her, after *Look Who's Talking* came out. "That's me.")

During the scripting process, was Ramis aware that Heckerling was using their real lives



Clockwise from main: Kirstie Alley as Mollie; A womb with a view; And so it begins — Mollie and lover Arthur (George Segal); James (John Travolta) bonds with Mikey; Olympia Dukakis as Mollie's mum — and adoring grandma — Rosie; Director Amy Heckerling on set with one of her baby actors.



for inspiration? “Not while I was writing it,” she says. “But when the movie came out... sure.” She laughs: “But you always use things from your life that make an impact on you. My friend Marty Brest [director of *Midnight Run*] called *Look Who's Talking* the ‘most profitable private joke ever.’” Mollie herself discovered the truth in 2004, and developed a relationship with Ramis before his death a decade later (“I loved him very dearly,” she wrote after he passed). Heckerling, too, has only good things to say about him today. “We were in touch many years later,” she reveals, with a smile. “And everything was just great and wonderful.”



FOR ALL THE SECRET REAL-LIFE DRAMA the script was packing, though, its USP was the high concept at its heart. Namely, the fact that, from the moment baby Mikey is conceived, the audience is privy to his inner thoughts.

As a sperm cell, we hear Mikey cracking wise down the fallopian tube (“Follow me, I know where I’m going!”). As a foetus, we watch him marvel at his newly formed hands (“Look at that — they match!”). From screeching newborn to cheeky toddler, we’re inside the little guy’s head every step of the way. “Nowadays, every advert, TikTok and Instagram makes babies talk,” Heckerling laughs. “And there’s been *Family Guy* and *Boss Baby* and [1999 talking-toddler flop] *Baby Geniuses*. But back then, there wasn’t much [like *Look Who's Talking*] around.”

Despite the fact she was navigating new narrative territory, the writing process was relatively painless. “I just knew this concept [of hearing what babies think] could be a hit,” the director says. What’s more, the strength of the concept allowed Heckerling to layer her screenplay with themes she would have struggled to sneak into a commercial film otherwise. Padded by Mikey’s cute, crowd-pleasing musings, Heckerling uses her protagonist Mollie (named after her “fuckin’ baby”) as a conduit to explore deeper issues like single motherhood, adultery and the pressure of the ‘biological clock’ (“That sense that your body is your enemy,” as she puts it today). “I knew no [studio] would ever accept a movie about a woman having a baby, and all her issues,” Heckerling says. “Nobody would care. ‘Oh, you’re nauseous? So what!’ But to make the film about a *boy* [Mikey], who’s funny and cool — that’s acceptable. That’s a way to sneak all those other issues through.”

The strategy proved more than acceptable. TriStar Pictures snapped the script up, attaching rising star Kirstie Alley to play Mollie. “She was just breaking out in *Cheers*,” Heckerling recalls. “She was hot.” Less hot at that exact moment was the actor who would wind up playing Mollie’s suitor, James — a charmingly hopeless New York cabbie, who chaperones Mollie to hospital for Mikey’s birth, and develops a bond with the newborn. “I had in mind someone edgy, who wouldn’t initially seem like good father material,” Heckerling reveals. “But one day I got talking >

to Jonathan Krane, who was John Travolta's manager [and went on to produce *Look Who's Talking*]. I told him about the script, and he said: 'Is there a part for John?' I was like: 'Woah! Would John do it? I'll rewrite it for him...'"

At the time, Travolta was muddling through the period of his career that could be filed under the subheading 'Setbacks'. A decade out from the star-making one-two punch of *Saturday Night Fever* and *Grease*, the actor was coming off a string of commercial failures, and had recently turned down roles in hits like *An Officer And A Gentleman* and *Splash*. He needed a win — and Heckerling was prepared to help him find it. "John is *John*," she says firmly, when *Empire* asks if she was concerned about casting an actor whose star was seemingly waning. "He's an artist. If it wasn't *Look Who's Talking* [that relaunched his career], it would have been something else." TriStar agreed — studio head Jeff Sagansky said at the time, "The town's top actors [have] all gone through troughs" — and Heckerling retooled James as "more lovable", in line with Travolta's amiable aura.

More difficult was nailing down the voice of Mikey's inner monologue. "We knew we needed someone funny," says Heckerling, whose first instinct was the '60s goofball comic Tommy Smothers. "But the studio wanted someone who was not only funny — but *cool*. Someone people would go out and see, even though they wouldn't actually *see* him." The someone they had in mind was a TV actor on the cusp of announcing himself as a major movie star, thanks to some vest-clad ass-whooping in 1988's *Die Hard*.

"Bruce [Willis] came to the editing room [before he was cast], to see what we wanted him to do," Heckerling remembers. "We showed him all this footage of babies, and he was like, 'Okay, I get it.' He looked at the footage for a while, did some sit-ups, looked at the footage some more, and then started improvising this hilarious stuff. He was so brilliant. We made the deal right there."

With the cast locked in and Vancouver selected as a cost-effective location to pose for New York, shooting finally got underway. Starting — as much in life does — with the sperm.



ASK ANYONE WHO HASN'T SEEN *LOOK Who's Talking* for a while what they remember about the film, and — babbling babies aside — the likeliest answer will be: the opening credits.

Right from the earliest drafts, the script had included an audacious intro sequence in which sperm flood Mollie's fallopian tubes, led by the loquacious cell that becomes Mikey. "We used this start-up special-effects place," Heckerling recalls. "Their idea was to make a tunnel full of water and drop the sperm down." The sperm themselves were "little rubber puppets", the director recalls. "They would all flop together, so we put fishing weights on them so they'd go down properly. It was all very primitive."

The scenes set outside the human body were a breeze in comparison. "Going in,

Top to bottom:
James on
babysitting
duties —
Travolta found
himself back in
the big leagues;
Toddler Mikey
(Jacob Haines)
finds himself
in a spot of
bother; Lifelong
friends-to-be
Travolta and
Alley on set with
Heckerling.





Alamy, Alistar, Courtesy of Amy Heckerling, Landmark, Mary Evans, Shutterstock

everybody knew that if this project was going to have a diva, it would be the babies," Heckerling laughs, of the four infants who play Mikey at varying stages of babyhood. "We all had to revolve around when the babies were crying or sleeping or whatever, so everybody behaved in the most un-'star'-like manner imaginable."

From the off, Travolta and Alley's chemistry was palpable. The two became lifelong friends — indeed, years later, Alley would admit that while their relationship was never physical, she was "madly in love with him". "It was instant between them," Heckerling confirms. "You couldn't stop them horsing around. John would break into a Barbra Streisand imitation during takes, just to crack Kirstie up."

For Willis, there was no horseplay or sudden bursts of 'Papa, Can You Hear Me?'. He was confined to the recording booth, watching endless baby footage, trying to make the script gel with the visuals. "It's one thing to write what a baby's doing; it's another to make them *do* it," laughs Heckerling. "And there was no video playback then, so we could never see if we got what we needed [from the babies]." They often didn't, and had to rely on Willis' improv chops to save them. "Bruce's imagination was brilliant," the director says. "He'd always find a line to make the scene work." She visibly wells up when touching on the dementia diagnosis that forced the actor's retirement in 2022: "Bruce. Fucking Bruce..." Her voice breaks as she gathers herself. "He was just the sharpest guy."

Nearly four decades on, the affection she still feels for Willis, Travolta and Alley — who passed away in 2022 — is evident: "My main

memories of the shoot are being with John, Kirstie and Bruce and having fun." After the nightmare of *European Vacation*, she was falling back in love with filmmaking. By early 1989, the film was finished and "flying" at test screenings. All was going swimmingly as Heckerling awaited the day her new movie would land in cinemas.

Until one morning — when she was told that day would probably never come.



IN HOLLYWOOD, MOST STUDIO MERGERS end up throwing some kind of spanner into the release-schedule works. But the 1989 acquisition of TriStar by Sony went one further. It saw *Look Who's Talking* shelved. Indefinitely.

"I really thought the movie [wouldn't come out]," Heckerling admits. "The party line was that John was 'box-office poison', so the people who took over said, 'We can't release this.' John became the fall guy. But really, it was because we did so great at [test] screenings. It wouldn't do the new people any good to say, 'The old people made this movie, and look how well it's doing...'"

Ultimately, it was the film's stars that saved it. "John and Bruce had made their deals based on the movie getting a wide release," Heckerling says. "As far as I know, they got together and threatened to sue the studio... and that's when it came out." She gestures around her with a smile: "So, it's thanks to John and Bruce that I have my house."

To this day, *Look Who's Talking* remains Heckerling's biggest hit — a warm, weird and disarmingly deep romcom that supercharged the careers of all involved (particularly Travolta, who showed he was anything *but* "box-office poison"). By proving that a famous voice can sell as many tickets as a famous face, it may also — Heckerling points out — have "given Disney some ideas. [Using A-listers as voice actors] wasn't really happening in animation yet..."

That said, the director still has little love for the film's two hastily-cobbled-together sequels. "I was kinda made to do the second one," she sighs of 1990's *Look Who's Talking Too*, which introduced Mikey's Roseanne Barr-voiced sister. "I was not delighted with it." As for the pet-centric third instalment, *Look Who's Talking Now* (boasting an impressive 0% on Rotten Tomatoes), Heckerling didn't direct that one — but her reaction when *Empire* mentions we recently watched it speaks volumes: "Ugh. Why? I can't watch it."

Rumours of remakes have bubbled up sporadically over the past three decades. But towards the end of our chat, Heckerling reveals that she's currently working on a new script within the franchise. In a pleasingly cyclical move, she's writing it with her daughter Mollie — who catalysed this cinematic universe back in 1985 as a "fuckin' baby". "Who knows if it'll become a 'thing'," Heckerling smiles. "But I'm excited. I'm not through with [*Look Who's Talking*] yet."

Ready the sperm puppets — another 'baby hit' may be entering the delivery room soon. ●



THE MOST MEMORABLE INFANT WISECRACKS FROM THE *LOOK WHO'S TALKING* SERIES

"Put me back in!"

MIKEY, THE MOMENT HE'S BORN

"This has got to be the weirdest thing that has ever happened to me... well, so far..."

MIKEY, A FEW SECONDS LATER

"Boy, I hope they don't get stuck together like that."

MIKEY WATCHING MOLLIE AND JAMES KISS

"I hate it. I look like a boy. No offence."

MIKEY'S FRIEND MAGGIE, ON HER NEW HAIRCUT

"Hey, I got more teeth than him!"

MIKEY MEETING HIS GRANDFATHER

"Don't you just hate it when you get your head stuck in your placenta?"

MIKEY'S LITTLE SISTER JULIE, IN THE WOMB

"I'm your big brother Mikey. I'm gonna be in charge of your life for the next two or three years — smacking you around, getting you in shape."

MIKEY MEETS JULIE

"Who's this asshole?"

JULIE MEETS MIKEY

"I'm not pooping in that thing. I've got my standards."

MIKEY, ON BEING PRESENTED WITH A POTTY

"Let's take her to the zoo. And leave her there."

MIKEY'S FRIEND EDDIE SUGGESTS A DAY OUT FOR JULIE

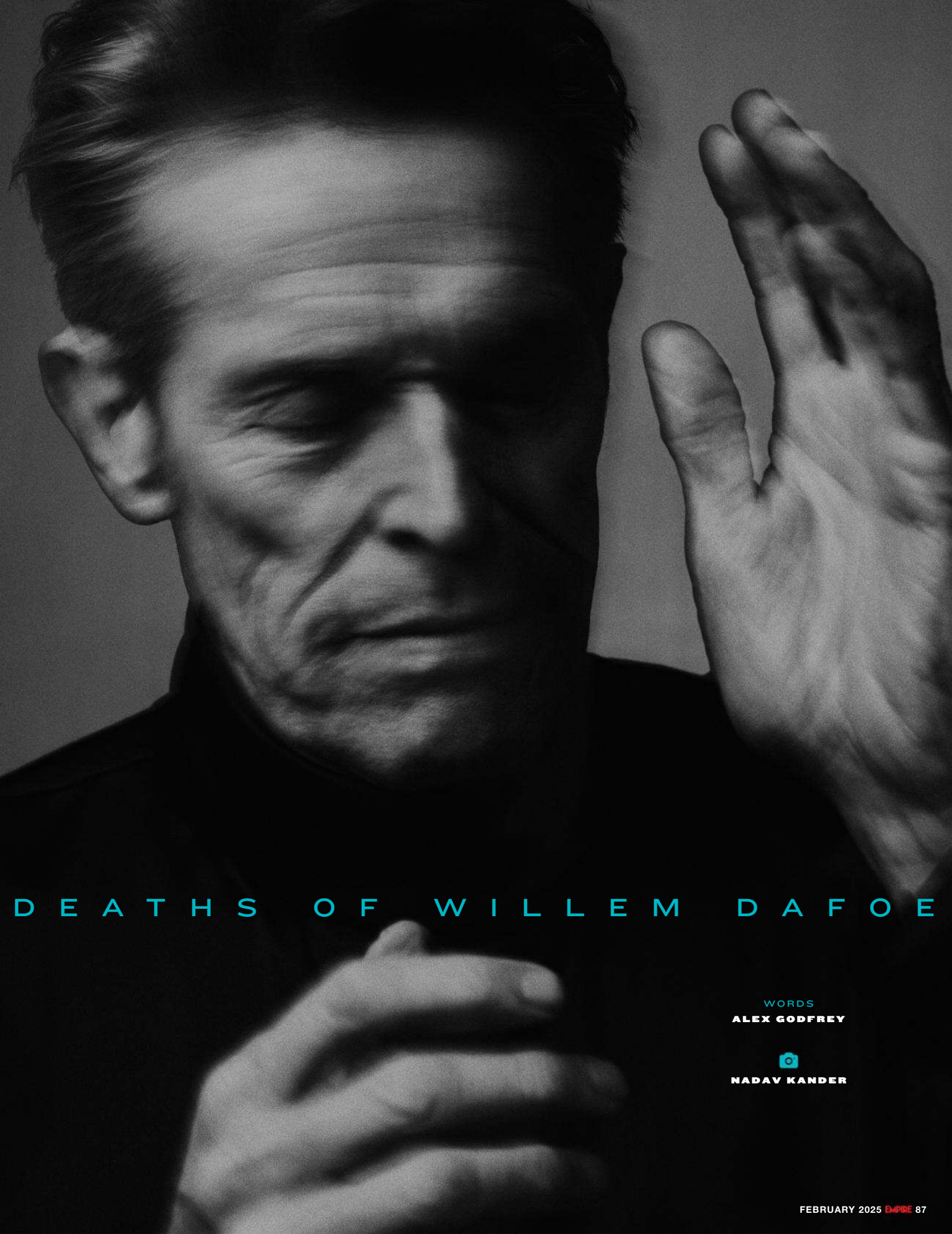
"As God is my witness, I'm going to learn to walk and get the hell out of here."

JULIE, MID-TANTRUM



T H E P E C U L I A R L I V E S A N D

*He's one of the world's biggest actors – but over five decades on screen, he's been consistently drawn to oddballs. With his unhinged vampire hunter in **NOSFERATU** about to be unleashed, we speak to him about challenging the norm*



DEATHS OF WILLEM DAFOE

WORDS
ALEX GODFREY


NADAV KANDER

Willem Dafoe,
photographed
exclusively for *Empire*
in London on
30 August 2024.



"CHAOS REIGNS," SAID THE FOX.

Lars von Trier's 2009 drama *Antichrist* was unforgiving cinema and, as the psychotherapist navigating his wife's (Charlotte Gainsbourg) overwhelming grief after the death of their young son, Willem Dafoe may have been the only actor capable of taking on its myriad challenges. It made perfect sense that von Trier would ask him to voice the fox too, uttering those words while eating itself alive.

On screen, Dafoe has never been far from chaos. His first film appearance, in 1980, was in Michael Cimino's notoriously catastrophic *Heaven's Gate*; Dafoe was fired for laughing at a joke on set. He was Oscar-nominated for playing Sgt Elias in 1986's *Platoon*, for which he and the cast underwent an extreme training process: Oliver Stone's team of Vietnam vets messed with the cast's minds and kept them awake by firing guns as they slept in holes they'd dug in the ground themselves. He starred as Jesus in Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation Of Christ*, released in a swirl of protest, terrorist attacks and death threats. He has played outsiders, crackpots and whack-jobs for those exploring the unorthodox: von Trier, three times, and also David Lynch, Paul Schrader, Yorgos Lanthimos, John Waters, Abel Ferrara and Tim Burton. He's worked with Robert Eggers three times now too, including the upcoming *Nosferatu*, in which he stars as vampire hunter Professor von Franz, an occult-obsessed, excommunicated academic who rigidly rejects conservative thinking.

As we discover over a glorious hour with Dafoe, speaking to *Empire* from a rustic study in his home in Rome, there's a reason he plays so many people on the fringes and from the underbelly. He is drawn to otherness, fascinated by those who see things differently. Dafoe, though, throughout our conversation, is ebullient and engaged, discussing his work with a joy that seems to only be getting stronger.

In *Nosferatu*, Professor von Franz has been laughed out of his university and country, after becoming enthralled by alchemy and

mysticism. And ultimately, there must be an extremism to him to even think about trying to thwart Nosferatu. What were your thoughts on his obsession?

Well, the key is, Robert [Eggers] started out as an actor. And this is the role Robert would play. So I'm standing in for Robert as I do von Franz, because I think Robert has some interest in the same things that von Franz is interested in, and I do as well, somewhat.

In what way?

I'm interested in the unseen world. I'm interested in the occult. I'm interested in homeopathy. I'm interested in alchemy. So it's fun to play that kind of character in that period context. But a lot also comes from von Franz's relationships with the other characters. It's all in a tangle of attraction, of sacrifice, of romance, of bodies, of science, of tradition. That's all a swirl. And I like that kind of mix.

Regarding what you were just saying about your own interests and how they overlap—

I mean, I don't want to over-stress that. (*Laughs*)

No, but von Franz says we've been blinded by science. What are your thoughts on our reliance on science, as opposed to the unknown, the supernatural, the things we can't comprehend?

Well, listen, I grew up in a medical family, so I'm surrounded by science and logic and mathematics and that sort of thing. But I've always been attracted to things that are kind of a contradiction of those things, the illogical, the unseen, the unexplainable. Not obsessively. As I say it, I think, "Wow, that sounds like I'm a real wild guy," like I'm always contemplating the dark side of things. But... I've always been drawn to belief systems and what people are afraid of and what shapes their strategies for living. I'm interested in spiritual impulse, and I think spiritual impulse gets addressed when you start trying to see what is behind what we see, or what we think we see. I think that's the business of

von Franz a little bit. He's always considering the possibility that there's something beyond what we understand. That's a basic sense of wonder and curiosity that I think is necessary to cultivate to have a good life.

Von Franz also has some encounters with rats. There were 5,000 of them on set. How was that to deal with?

It was fun. It's not something you get to do every day, you know? The most difficult thing was you were always worried about stepping on them. But they were very sweet rats, and I wasn't worried about getting bitten. It was quite difficult to keep them all in one place and keep them from scurrying off set. They aren't natural actors. They've got better things to do, like... eat things, you know? And burrow. (*Laughs*)

In 2000's *Shadow Of The Vampire* you played Nosferatu, sort of — certainly the actor who played him, Max Schreck. Eddie Izzard's character explains that Schreck is a character actor, and that "as part of his preparation, he submerges his own personality in the character he's playing". He says, "He went to Czechoslovakia weeks ago to absorb the flavour of the place." On *The Lighthouse*, during filming you stayed in a fisherman's cottage on your own and submerged yourself in that environment. So do you see yourself like that?

I don't quite recognise that, because I think you gotta have some idea of what the character is to surrender yourself to the situation, and then the situation makes the character emerge. Method actors want to be called by their character's name, or they will only wear things that they wear in the movie, to smear the line between being on camera and their life while they're making it. I'm not really like that at all.

But you chose to stay in that little cottage on *The Lighthouse* while everyone else was fraternising in a hotel with their mod cons.

Just because I can concentrate better. Am I [*The Lighthouse's*] Thomas Wake when I'm at home [there]? No, but I love waking up early to practise, and making a little fire in the potbelly stove. And I like looking out and checking the weather. They're all things that help me be there when I have to be there. It's not rigid. I don't try to close out other things. But every time you go on location, you're taken away from your routine, and particularly if you're by yourself, which I usually am, you have an opportunity to live a different way. And it usually makes sense to have that coloured somewhat by what your character is. And if you have a particular profession or skill that you're practising for the movie, it's natural that in your time there, you deal with that. So I guess I'm trying to tell you that I don't quite relate to this thing of staying in character.

Which I'm sure you didn't do for the next Robert Eggers film you did, *The*



Top to bottom, left to right: Breaking out in *Platoon* (1986); Playing Jesus in *The Last Temptation Of Christ* (1988); In Lars von Trier's *Antichrist* (2009); As Max Schreck in *Shadow Of The Vampire* (2000); Dafne's Robert Eggers hatracket: *The Lighthouse* (2019); *The Northman* (2022); and *Nosferatu*.

Pasolini, you are run over repeatedly with your own car. And lest we forget [in *The Last Temptation Of Christ*], crucifixion.
Yes. But did I die...? (*Laughs*)

I guess that's a matter of perspective. Do you get a kick out of seeing yourself die in different ways?

I do. Because... it raises the stakes. Everyone, unless they're asleep, has an imagination about their death. So when you're in a little fiction, getting to play out this kind of fantasy of imagining a version of what could happen to you, even in these extreme cases, something about that experience is elevated. It's not normal. It's very specific and it's personal, but it's not you, because the circumstances are not of your life. So that's where you're really able to tap into that childlike imagination of playing cops and robbers. Because you have a stake, and some kind of understanding of the fear, the drama of dying. And you've thought about it, somehow. So then to enact it, even without any real risk or any real reality, is a beautiful exercise. I'm sure somewhere there are some rituals in various cultures where it's done to help people prepare for their death.

Clearly you're drawn to the unconventional. You were made to leave high school for producing a documentary segment for which you interviewed three students who were all outsiders: a drug dealer, a Satan worshipper and a nudist. So it seems you've always been interested in people on the fringes, and you've played them a lot. Do you agree?

I do. I do. Because they're not me, and they also give us a different perspective, because if you're functioning in society, you're ruled by the rules of society. And some people, through circumstances or tragedy or lack of something, are forced outside of that, but the result is they have a different perspective. And those are the people that can say, "Oh, the emperor is not wearing any clothes." It takes the people that aren't ruled by the agreement of the majority to let us see. Because, if you have any ambition, and particularly if you're living in a materialist, capitalist culture, it's all about accumulation, it's all about getting ahead in the world, it's about comfort, it's about keeping the wolf from the door. So when you address people that don't have that luxury of that kind of comfort, sometimes they can really make you see the reality of things better than you can, because you've been coddled. So it's a little bit of an experiment. You can say, "Well, that's just romantic," but something about that kind of romance and imagination about those things gets me going. Makes me see new possibilities.

You seek out directors that explore such material, too. You've worked with Lars von Trier three times. Most notably on *Antichrist*, which is a major and very moving piece of work.

I think it's a really good movie. It really kicks >

***Northman*, in which your character Heimir, a jester, is killed and ends up as a little, dead, mummified head.**

Yeah, that's beautiful. (*Laughs*)

What was your first thought when you saw that? Because it does genuinely look exactly like you and it's an exquisite, unsettling thing.

Well, that was part of the enticement. I mean, I knew that there was going to be that little head, and... you know, it's nice to have a good entrance and a good exit.

Yes, many of your characters have died in extraordinary ways. Would you oblige me if I list some of them?

Sure, do it.

***The Northman*, then: decapitated, mummified. *The Lighthouse*, you're smashed in the head with an axe, but also buried alive before that. *Platoon*, you're shot to bits. *Wild At Heart*, you shotgun your own head to bits. *Shadow Of The Vampire*, you sort of spontaneously-Burn.**



*"Everyone, unless they're asleep, has an imagination
about their death... So then to enact it, even without any
real risk or any real reality, is a beautiful exercise."*

Styling: Eric Down.

Styling assistant: Cara Woodward.

Grooming: Jennie Roberts at A-Frame

Agency, skin care using The Grey
and hair using Patrick's.

A man in a dark suit is shown from the waist up, standing against a light blue background. He has a translucent, double-exposed appearance, with a second, slightly offset image of himself visible behind him. His hands are positioned in front of him, palms facing outwards, as if he is feeling something or gesturing. The lighting is soft and even, highlighting the contours of his suit and the texture of the background.

*"We don't watch a performance because it's like life.
We watch a performance because something very
particular and very special is happening."*



Clockwise from top left: With Nicolas Cage in David Lynch's *Wild at Heart* (1987); As experimental scientist Godwin Baxter in Yorgos Lanthimos' *Poor Things*; Suiting up as the Green Goblin in *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021).

the hornets' nest and talks about some things that are very difficult to speak about. If you're not too bright, you can misidentify it, but it's really interesting about the way it talks about logic and illogic and emotion and grief and women's powers and men's fear of women, and sexuality... There's a whole stew there that I think is really well addressed.

Lars was extremely depressed when he wrote it and made it. The shoot itself was somewhat tenuous as he was on the brink, some days, of being incapable of being on set. What was it like to navigate that?

It was a small cast, and we were in quite a remote place, and he was quite delicate. Very committed, but very delicate. We'd have dinner, and he'd say, "Listen, I may not be there tomorrow. I will be directing by remote, from the trailer." And he'd say that almost every day, but he was always there. So yeah, it was tenuous (*laughs*), but after a little while, you realised that he just needed to say that in order to go on. So that kind of tension can be nerve-racking, but if you're engaged, it also can be beautiful, because you don't think about yesterday, you don't think about tomorrow, you're very much involved in what you're doing. That kind of concentration is what makes the difference between a good or bad performance. I've been doing this long enough that maybe I have some craft, some things that I can lean on, but a movie like *Antichrist*, you're a little bit in freefall. But if you feel safe in freefall, and if you trust your partners in freefall, that can be very exhilarating.

At what point did he ask you to voice the fox as well? "Chaos reigns" is an iconic line... (*Laughs*) He had me voice the fox, but then, knowing him, he probably voiced it himself after, and he didn't tell me.

David Lynch's *Wild at Heart* feels of a piece with what we've been discussing. Bobby Peru is scuzzy and sleazy, he's quite reptilian. You've said the dentures were a big part of that.

Yep. Huge. Huge. They were everything. They really made the difference, because they were an obstacle. They made me feel different. They transformed me. I'm telling you, *you* could be Bobby Peru if I gave you those teeth. You could be a version of Bobby Peru if I gave you those teeth and put them on top of your teeth, and you can close your mouth and you (*transforms his mouth and jawline and shows us how to do it*)... Just do this. Yeah, relax your jaw a little bit. That puts you in a certain state of mind right there. Don't you feel something swinging downstairs?

I didn't expect to be doing a Bobby Peru workshop today.

(*Laughs*) Well, you know. Might as well. We're here!

On the subject of things that physically help your performance, let's discuss your Norman Osborn in the *Spider-Man* films — a particularly unhinged human being. In 2002's *Spider-Man*, the Green Goblin costume left something to be desired, not least because it concealed your face. And then for 2021's *No Way Home* it's like

they realised, "Hang on — we've got Willem Dafoe. We don't need a mask." How do you feel about that?

It was just a pleasure to return to that character. Just like the original, I like the fact that within a scene it could careen from being goofy comedy to drama to action. It has a lot of tricks up its sleeve. And it was a double role. Everybody concentrates on the Green Goblin, but that's mostly action stuff. I like doing that, and I think I can do it gracefully. But the real meat in the first one is the guy *without* the mask, Norman Osborn. Those are the meaty scenes. So when people complain about the mask, it's like, "Come on." The role is Norman. And then in [*No Way Home*], we have a little bit more Norman, because part of the game is, you don't know how much of the Green Goblin is back and how much it's Norman. That's the whole play.

Yorgos Lanthimos said — no, sorry, actually you said this—

You're confusing what Yorgos says with what I say? He'd be appalled! (*Laughs*)

You said that on *Poor Things*, you did a take and he said, "Oh, you've done a Willem." And he asked you to do it again and not do that. Did you recognise what he meant?

Yes. I think he gives me more credit than I deserve about what kind of ability I have as an actor. He's kind of allergic to a certain kind of acting. He's allergic to acting, period. He doesn't want you to act. So any time he feels something kind of crafted... the point is, he says you're leaning on something that isn't pure enough for this character. At least, that's my interpretation. I had to... take the hot sauce off a little. Hold the hot sauce!

On that... I read an interview with you from 1987, in which you said, "A performance is like a life that I flail angrily through until it's over." Do you still feel like that?

Sometimes I do. Yes. I mean, you have to make contact. It's gotta be elevated. We don't watch a performance because it's like life. We watch a performance because something very particular and very special is happening. It shouldn't remind us necessarily of our life. It shouldn't necessarily remind us of our feelings. It should be beyond that. At its best, it should make us think, "Wow, I never thought like that," or, "I never imagined that." *That's* when a performance turns *me* on. And it's not about size or melodrama or transgression. Some of my favourite actors when I was a kid were very laid-back, non-histrionic actors like Warren Oates or Harry Dean Stanton. 1987, wow. I'm a different person now, but that sounds okay. I don't mind being tagged by that. 🍷

NOSFERATU IS IN CINEMAS FROM 1 JANUARY

final cut



A FRESH LOOK AT HOME ENTERTAINMENT

FEBRUARY 2025 | EDITED BY CHRIS HEWITT

The Chris(tmas) Chronicles

CHRIS COLUMBUS TALKS *EMPIRE* THROUGH HIS RUN OF ICONIC YULETIDE MOVIES WORDS JOHN NUGENT

EVERY CHRISTMAS, a jolly man commandeers our screens to bring gifts of festive joy and good cheer. His name? Chris Columbus (no relation to the explorer). He is the filmmaker behind some of the most beloved, endlessly rewatchable Christmas films of the past four decades. His Crimbo-filmography began in 1985 as the screenwriter behind *Gremlins*; later, he almost directed *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*, before scoring his first major hit as director with 1990's home-invasion classic *Home Alone*, and its inarguably superior 1992 sequel. Less festive films followed (including *Mrs. Doubtfire* and the first two *Harry Potters*), but Columbus always found a way to return to the Yuletide hearth, whether as writer (*Christmas With The Kranks*), producer (*Jingle All The Way*), or director (*The Christmas Chronicles 2*). He spoke to *Empire* about his longtime love of the holiday spirit — and why *Nosferatu* is a stealth Christmas movie.

Is Christmas a big deal for you? What is Christmas like at the Columbus house?
Christmas is a big deal for me. I enjoy it

tremendously. I treat it as a way to improve the lighting in my house, if nothing else. (*Laughs*) I've realised over the years that it's kind of an easy lighting trick to add a few Christmas trees and some candlelight to a scene, and suddenly it's quite beautiful.

Your first Christmas film was *Gremlins* in 1985. You were pretty young when you wrote that, right?

Yeah, I was still in college. I was living in a loft in Manhattan with a couple of friends of mine, and we had mice. When I went to sleep at night, the mice would scuttle by in the middle of the night and wake me up. I thought, "These little things keeping me awake at night are pretty frightening," and it just inspired this idea of *Gremlins*. The script came out rather quickly. Within a few weeks, actually.

How did it find its way to Steven Spielberg as producer? That's quite a coup.

It was sent out to 50 or 60 different producers and production companies. Everyone passed on it. It had been sitting on Steven's assistant's





Clockwise from main: Kevin McCallister (Macaulay Culkin) and burglar Harry (Joe Pesci) in *Home Alone* (1990); Billy (Zach Galligan) and critter pals in *Gremlins* (1984); Culkin with director Chris Columbus on *Home Alone 2*.

desk, and he looked at the script that happened to be on the top of the pile, which was *Gremlins*. He liked the title, and he just grabbed it and took it home for the weekend. A few days later, I got a call. My roommate said, "Steven Spielberg's on the phone." I didn't believe it. I thought it was a prank. I answered the phone, and I heard the voice, and I immediately knew it was Steven.

Was *Gremlins* always a Christmas movie?

I think it probably was, because I do remember that in the script, the dog was killed by being hung from Christmas lights. And in the movie, the dog is just sort of strung up in the lights. (Laughs) Steven was actually quite instrumental in turning it from a hard-R to PG-13.

Not long after *Gremlins*, you very nearly directed *National Lampoon's Christmas*



Vacation. Is it true you left because of Chevy Chase?

Exactly. John Hughes had the same agent as me, and sent me the script for *Christmas Vacation*. I thought it was very funny. I even shot some initial establishing second-unit shots for the movie — shots that are in the film now. And then I met with Chevy Chase. It's no surprise — you've heard this story a million times — but he was a complete jerk. And even though I was in a situation where I desperately needed a job, I decided that I had to bow out. Two weeks later, I got two scripts from John Hughes again. One was a script called 'Reach The Rock', which I didn't respond to. And the other was *Home Alone*.

***Home Alone* is such an ambitious, mad film. Was it stressful to make?**

It was stressful to make only because it was essentially a low-budget film. We didn't have the money to build all of the sets. We were outside in the dead of winter in February in Chicago, which is brutal. It's difficult to do stunts when it's that cold. Cameras were freezing on us. That was the gruelling side of the production. Every time we'd shoot a stunt, no-one would laugh. Everyone thought the stunt performer was dead. The crew would gather around, look at the performer and say, "You okay?" And when we saw the thumbs up, we knew that everything was good.

Did anyone actually get hurt?

There were plenty of bruises, but never any broken bones. No-one ever got seriously hurt.

It is essentially a live-action cartoon. Were you inspired by Looney Tunes?

Yeah. *Gremlins* is also based on my love of those early Warner Bros. cartoons. They were extraordinarily violent and very funny. I mean, in reality, any of the stunts in *Home Alone* would kill. Particularly the bricks in the second film. Throwing a brick from a four-storey building onto someone's head would kill them immediately. (Laughs)

The first *Home Alone* was a huge hit — at one point the third-biggest film of all time. Did you see that coming?

We never expected that. I think it was number one for 13 or 14 weeks. It was extraordinary. But the film was not well-received by critics. I always valued critics who knew their stuff, so you get hurt when you read those reviews. But now that the film has such longevity, it's outlasted all of them. It's been preserved by the National [Film Registry] in the United States. I feel very happy about that — that the film will go on long after I'm not here.

You moved pretty quickly on the sequel, right? John Hughes had a script written a couple of months after the first film was released.

Yeah, fairly quickly. We just decided to get back



Right: The Gremlins turn nasty. **Far right:** Harry, Kevin and Marv (Daniel Stern) in *Home Alone 2: Lost In New York*. **Below right:** Donald Trump makes a cameo appearance in *Home Alone 2*.



into it. We were very fortunate that we had the same cast. Macaulay [Culkin] was essentially just a few months older. Some of the older actors weren't particularly happy being on the first film. Some of them complained about being supporting actors to a kid; there was a little jealousy. And then, after the success of the first one, suddenly they were very respectful! Things had changed a little bit. I guess, if I were being honest, they probably didn't trust me, or had no idea what I was going to deliver. The second film was a lot easier in terms of production — and egos.

Was it more complicated, shooting on the streets of New York?

No. I spent four years at NYU, shooting all of my

“Mice scuttling by in the middle of the night inspired *Gremlins*.”

Alamy, Imago





Main: Ron (Rupert Grint), Hermione (Emma Watson) and Harry (Daniel Radcliffe) in *Harry Potter And The Philosopher's Stone* (2001). **Left:** Columbus chats to Grint and Radcliffe on the set of 2002's *Harry Potter And The Chamber Of Secrets*.

student films on the streets of New York. So it's a very comfortable place for me to shoot. When I get back to New York, in the middle of the city, I feel surrounded and safe. In the suburbs of a place like Chicago, I'm always like: that's where the bad things happen. That's where the Manson family preyed on people in Los Angeles. That's where burglars come into your house, like *In Cold Blood*. All of those things formed an opinion in me as a young child. Home invasion became a great source of anxiety for me. I think I brought that to the *Home Alone* films in a big way.

Donald Trump seems to disagree with you on the story of how he bullied his way into getting a cameo...

You don't really want Trump disagreeing with you, because God knows, I don't want to be on the enemies list. (Laughs) But I remember very distinctly we needed to shoot at the Plaza Hotel. Trump agreed to let us shoot at the Plaza Hotel if he could have a cameo in the film. I said, "Fine." Trump was very pleasant! At the time, he was just a New York real-estate personality. We had no idea of what sort of person he really was. He was a popular figure. I mean, still is, obviously, based on the last election.

Well, it's not like him to bend the truth, is it?

It's like, "Dude, you've got so much more to worry about than whether or not your *Home Alone* story differs from mine! There are other things on your plate!"

A few years after *Home Alone*, you brought *Harry Potter* to the big screen. They're not strictly Christmas films, but a lot of people rewatch them around the festive season.

It's interesting. I saw a list online of 'Films that you want to cuddle up to this Christmas', and the *Harry Potter* films were mentioned. Those first three films have the warm, fuzzy glow of discovery at Hogwarts. J.K. Rowling had told us that the books were going to get progressively darker — so we made a conscious effort on the first three films to have a certain 'holiday quality'. Christmas is a part of it, but not a big part of it. In *Philosopher's Stone*, it was interesting to me that certain kids were left alone at Hogwarts at Christmas, like every boarding school. And then 20 years later that happens in Alexander Payne's *The Holdovers*!

Even more than the Christmassy themes, there's a certain rewatchability value to your films — is that something you're

conscious of when making them?

That was a mantra on a lot of the films that I've been involved with. I would talk to the crew and the heads of departments about the fact that the movie has to have a sense of timelessness. Even in films I do today, I tend to shy away from modern references.

HBO are gearing up to remake *Potter* for TV — what are your feelings about that?

Look, I wish them luck. With the TV series, you have the opportunity to basically film the entire book. So that's exciting. They can get into things that we could never get into — [like] the character of Peeves, who we tried to put in the first film. They've got a bit of a challenge, I think. There's a certain stylistic quality to those films you either have to depart [from] or you have to embrace. Do they completely rethink the look of Hogwarts? Do they use the John Williams theme? I don't know how you do that. But I look forward to seeing it.

More recently, you produced *The Christmas Chronicles*, and co-wrote and directed the sequel. How was that experience?

Kurt Russell really was the best. The reason those films work so well is because Kurt committed to the role of Santa Claus in the same way that any Method actor would commit. He said that it's a role he's been dying to play his entire life. He wrote about 85 pages of personal mythology for himself to study about Santa's background. He said he wants to continue to play that role for the rest of his life. We just have to find stories that are worthy of his talent.

You are a prolific producer, too — is that an important part of your work?

Yeah. When we did the first *Chronicles*, Kurt [Russell] asked me personally — it was more of an insistence — that I'd be there the entire time. So *Chronicles* was the first time I had been on a film as a producer, 24/7 all the time.

People might be surprised that you're a regular producer for Robert Eggers, too — including *The Witch*, *The Lighthouse* and *Nosferatu*. What is that collaboration like?

Rob and I talk about ourselves as the odd couple in the film industry. We even joke that the poster for *Nosferatu* could say, "From the director of *Home Alone* and the director of *The Witch*." (Laughs)

What was your role like on *Nosferatu*?

I said to Eggers, "I'll be there for the first couple of weeks." And he said, "No, I need you there as a creative producer for the whole time." So I moved to Prague for eight months. It was one of the most creatively joyful experiences in my life, to be able to produce like that. It's inspirational. And in a way, *Nosferatu* has become my latest Christmas film — it takes place over Christmas. The most twisted, hard-R-rated Christmas film I've done. (Laughs)



The Ranking

A Christmas Carol adaptations

FOUR *EMPIRE* WRITERS. LOTS OF EBENEZER SCROOGES. MERRY CHRISTMAS



RUSSELL MOORCROFT

OUR CRITICS



CHRIS HEWITT

Coined the word "Scroogical". Is beyond help.



HELEN O'HARA

Hosts *Bah Humbug*. A remarkable pod! An intelligent pod!



JAMIE GRAHAM

Tried to buy a turkey for a crown. Didn't end well.



NEEL BHATT

To this day, thinks Michael Caine is a surprisingly lifelike puppet.

Chris: What the Dickens?

It's the festive season, so what better thing to Rank than the various adaptations of Charles Dickens' classic tale, *A Christmas Carol*? Why are filmmakers drawn to this story again and again?

Jamie: It's a novella, so there's not too much to strip away. It's ideal for the screen, and it's such a wonderful Christmas story. It's got so much 'bah humbug' in it, and it's got scary ghosts and different moods. It's quite dark and depressing for a lot of it, like *It's A Wonderful Life*, but it ends on that magnificent moment of joy.

Neel: Christmas, for a lot of people, is a time for reflection, which is exactly what this does. Scrooge is relatable in certain ways.

Helen: The Victorians invented a lot of what we think of as 'Christmas'. So there's an argument to be made that it was part of that movement, of creating the modern Christmas. And it's therefore become part of our Christmas DNA. It's got these chunks of perfect dialogue-

Chris: That I'm absolutely sick of now.

Helen: Give it another year or so, and we'll be ready for more.

Chris: Do you want your *Christmas Carol* adaptations to be faithful, or like me, are you overjoyed when a filmmaker goes off the rails slightly and deviates?

Helen: Both, is the answer.

I was really impressed that the 1999 Patrick Stewart one had

the lighthouse scene that everybody else leaves out. Equally, I'm thrilled when a *Scrooged* comes along and totally throws out the text.

Chris: Although that's very faithful structurally.

Helen: And then you have *Blackadder's Christmas Carol*, which inverts the whole thing. I love when people mess with it, if they do it well.

Chris: I'm going to throw in a movie that is pretty delightful, I think, in the risks it takes with *A Christmas Carol*:

Spirited. It has some really good songs by Pasek and Paul — the 'Good Afternoon' song, with the cameo from Judi Dench, is one of the best songs in any of these Scroogicals. And the chemistry between Will Ferrell and Ryan Reynolds is great.

Jamie: The 'Good Afternoon' song is wonderful. They explain that "Good afternoon" in Dickens' time was a sick burn for Victorian England, and actually means, "Fuck you."

Chris: So when Scrooge's nephew, Fred, comes in at the beginning and Scrooge says, "Good afternoon, nephew," it's really fun now that you know he's saying, "Fuck off."

Helen: Fred is an interesting one, whose role goes up and down in size. The 1938 *Christmas Carol*, the MGM version with Reginald Owen as Scrooge, makes Fred really prominent. I find that one in particular fascinating. It's an American studio *Christmas Carol* and it's so glossy.

Chris: I preferred that to the



1935 version, which has Seymour Hicks as Scrooge, and which is so cheap, they can't afford to show Jacob Marley's ghost. But the first big touchstone is the Alastair Sim version, isn't it? And isn't it interesting that we don't talk about these films in terms of their directors, but their Scrooges?

Jamie: Well, Alastair Sim, to me, is pretty much the ultimate Scrooge. He was born to play Scrooge.

Chris: That's the one that sets the template of what a *Christmas Carol* adaptation is.

Helen: My parents definitely still refer to Alastair Sim. I imprinted on Michael Caine. But Sim is a very good Scrooge. It does the traditional version pretty much as well as it could be done. But my favourite Scrooge performance might be George C. Scott.

Jamie: I agree with you. Largely because he just brings so much. He fills in all the little gaps and brings humanity and he brings the fear.

Chris: I like that he's an unrepentant shit for the most part. By the way, that has my favourite Ghost Of Christmas Present, with Edward Woodward just holding Scrooge in open contempt.

Neel: Scott is brilliant. He's a curmudgeon, he's grumpy, he's just ideal. I think you need that slight resistance to change for a Scrooge.

Chris: Is there any love for Albert Finney?

Neel: Not a lot of love. But the way they go to hell at the end is creepy, and different to everything else we've seen. It's terrifying and weird.

Jamie: I like the fact that it's a Scroogical, to use your term.

Chris: Yes, it's catching on!



Jamie: And Albert Finney clearly does not give a shit. He kind of growls along.
Chris: He Rex Harrisons it.
Helen: I don't like the songs in the 1970 version. Albert Finney is a low bar, but I don't love the songs in a lot of the musicals. The Kelsey Grammer one, I really struggled with.
Chris: It should be a home run, but he's phoning it in.
Neel: For the first ten minutes, he's squinting.
Helen: That's a sneer, I think.
Chris: That's a TV movie. As is the George C. Scott one, and the Patrick Stewart one from 1999. It's a bit drab visually. But he's really good. Is there any love for the Carrey and Zemeckis one from 2009?
Jamie: There's imagination in there, like when they're flying over the town and soaring up to the church spires. It's quite lovely, but

overall it's a bit dodgy.
Helen: I couldn't get through it. I genuinely find it disturbing.
Chris: Jim Carrey plays all the ghosts as well, and he makes some wild accent choices.
Neel: It's just a really bad video game.
Chris: What about Mickey Mouse or Blackadder?
Helen: It's very well boiled down, *Mickey's Christmas Carol*. And I think Scrooge McDuck is brilliant.
Chris: Big fan of a 25-minute running time. Some of these tip two hours, and you should not be taking that long to tell this story.
Jamie: There's so much humour as well, and yet it stays close to the story.
Neel: It just shows how much you can strip away from the story and still be very funny, very entertaining.

Chris: I didn't like *Blackadder's Christmas Carol* when it came out, but by Jove, it made me laugh a lot this time.
Helen: It's really funny. It's basically a reverse *Christmas Carol* where the ghosts tell a very nice Blackadder what a good job he's doing and it makes him reconsider his ways and turn into a complete bastard.
Chris: Okay, let's talk about two of the biggies: *The Muppet Christmas Carol* and *Scrooged*.
Helen: Well, *Muppet Christmas Carol*, I think a lot of us fell in love with as children. I think it's astonishing. And you've got Michael Caine in the middle of it, treating it dead straight,

more seriously probably than Alastair Sim or Patrick Stewart. And that makes the Muppets work.
Chris: I've been wrestling with this: do I love this movie because I saw it at the right age, or is it genuinely a great version of *A Christmas Carol*? I think it's the latter. It's a faithful reproduction, but it Muppetises it beautifully, with Gonzo as Charles Dickens, allowing it to have this spark of anarchy.
Neel: There's a fine line between whimsical and ridiculous, and it does it so well. And the songs are banger after banger after banger.
Jamie: It has the songs, and the slapstick, but it keeps the pathos, and that is so hard to do. It puts the "felt" into "heartfelt".
Helen: It and *Scrooged* I went back and forth on for my number one. I love *Scrooged* a lot, always have. For a long time it was ahead of the Muppets. I thought it was such a clever adaptation and was so smart. Carol Kane, my God, ten out of ten.
Jamie: Do you think it nails the landing?
Helen: There's an argument to be made that Bill Murray doesn't grow or change terribly well. But I don't care.
Chris: He's going to revert to type the very next day, guaranteed. I like *Scrooged*, but watching it again diminished it. It didn't feel like it was funny enough, it didn't feel like it was taking enough risks. I still enjoy it, and Bill Murray is fantastic. But I don't buy the transformation at all. And for a *Christmas Carol* adaptation to truly work, you have to buy the transformation.
Neel: I agree, but I don't mind so much.
Chris: It keeps me awake at night.
Helen: It ends with a singalong. How could that possibly be bad?
Chris: Right, enough squabbling. Let's vote!

AGREE? DISAGREE?

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THE TOP TEN

- 1  **THE MUPPET CHRISTMAS CAROL** (1992)
- 2  **SCROOGED** (1988)
- 3  **A CHRISTMAS CAROL** (1984)
- 4  **SCROOGE** (1951)
- 5  **MICKEY'S CHRISTMAS CAROL** (1983)
- 6  **A CHRISTMAS CAROL** (1999)
- 7  **SPIRITED** (2022)
- 8  **SCROOGE** (1970)
- 9  **BLACKADDER'S CHRISTMAS CAROL** (1988)
- 10  **A CHRISTMAS CAROL** (1938)

Coven garden

AGATHA ALL ALONG SHOWRUNNER
JAC SCHAEFFER ON HER
WITCHES' BREW

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

THE SHOW MAY have been called *Agatha All Along*, but Jac Schaeffer's follow-up to *WandaVision* turned out to be much more than just a vehicle for Kathryn Hahn to show off what she could do (the answer: pretty much all of it). Around Agatha Harkness, Schaeffer constructed a witches' coven of compelling characters, and put them through a series of terrifying trials on The Witches' Road. Here, Schaeffer dissects them (and their ultimate fates, so beware of spoilers) exclusively for *Empire*...

AGATHA HARKNESS

Mind you, the final episode does very much lean into the show's title, revealing that 'The Ballad Of The Witches' Road', the song that runs through the entire season (it's the first thing we hear, as Agatha hums it in her car), was actually created by Agatha back in the 1700s, in tandem with her poor, doomed son, Nicholas Scratch. "It was my hope that where we were going with the show was to an emotional truth for Agatha that was very private and very intimate," says Schaeffer. "Where I started with Agatha on this show is, 'Agatha is a liar. What is her truth?'"

By the end of the show, Agatha's circumstances have changed significantly. Long story short: she's now a ghost. "We knew from the very beginning that Agatha would end as a ghost," laughs Schaeffer. "She's a terrific ghost. It felt very correct to do that." But don't confuse this for a redemption arc. "I do think we witness change in this woman," says Schaeffer, "but she's not a good guy at the end of the show, and I don't think she ever will be."

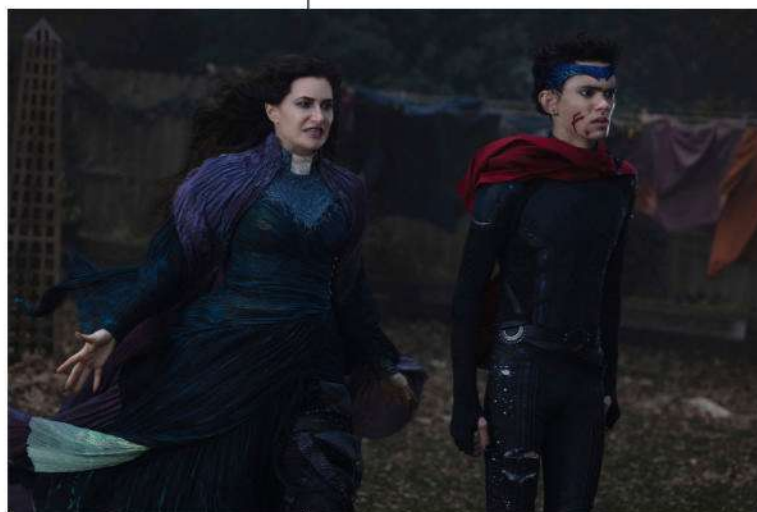
BILLY MAXIMOFF

The cat is well and truly out of the cauldron now. For the first five episodes, Joe Locke's character was known, to the audience and the other characters, as Teen, thanks to a sneaky sigil preventing him from revealing his true identity: he's Billy Maximoff, one of the twins Wanda conjured into existence during *WandaVision* (and tore half the multiverse apart while looking for them in the Doctor Strange sequel). "Pretty early I was like, 'We're gonna hide who this kid is,'" says Schaeffer. "People will, in their guts, know it's Billy, but we're going to try and unfurl that mystery in a way that is enticing and satisfying."



Above: Spellbound: Jen Kale (Sasheer Zamata), Teen/Billy (Joe Locke), Agatha (Kathryn Hahn), Alice Wu-Gulliver (Ali Ahn) and Lilia Calderu (Patti LuPone).

Right: Billy's secret's well and truly out.



Perhaps the biggest twist of a show so crammed with twists it would leave Keyser Soze's head spinning was the eighth-episode revelation that The Witches' Road wasn't real. That it had, in fact, been conjured into being unconsciously by Billy, who had been imbued by Wanda with reality-shaping powers almost

on the same level as hers. "The whole show is predicated on a long con," says Schaeffer. "That is, a lie that Agatha told, that Billy made true. It was the elegance of that idea that I really responded to." Since the show ends with Agatha's ghost teaming up with Billy to track down his missing twin, Tommy,



Top to bottom:
 Creator Jac
 Schaeffer with
 Hahn on set;
 Star quality;
 Death becomes
 her — Aubrey
 Plaza's Rio
 reveals herself;
 Lilia hanging
 out; In your
 face, Spidey!
 Alice in action;
 Potions Witch
 Jen has one hell
 of a pestle...



things might just be about to dial up to Maximum Maximoff.

RIO VIDAL

Another of the show's biggest twists — that Aubrey Plaza's Rio Vidal, Agatha's ex and a Green Witch who joins the coven on the Road, is actually Death, come to harvest Agatha and Billy's souls — is, arguably, not a twist at all. It's not so much that clues are scattered throughout Rio's appearances before that; Rio pretty much blatantly states who she is, and what she wants ("You get your powers back, and I get my bodies"). "It's Aubrey Plaza!" laughs Schaeffer of the casting that, in and of itself, should have been a dead giveaway, with the emphasis heavily on dead.

Rio does finally get one of the things she came for, in spectacular fashion, taking Agatha's life (but, crucially, not her soul) via the means of the MCU's most spectacular same-sex kiss. "This kiss of death is the culmination of their relationship," says Schaeffer. "There's so much love and tenderness and also so much violence and resentment and toxicity and difficulty, that it could culminate in a kiss that was at once intimate and romantic and lustful and the death blow." It's a heck of a smacker.

LILIA CALDERU

Episode 7 not only contains that Rio revelation, but is probably the show's highpoint, focusing as it does on Patti LuPone's Lilia Calderu, a Divination Witch whose ability to perceive time in a non-linear fashion pays off in emotional fashion. "I love a bookend," laughs Schaeffer, referring to the episode opening with Lilia falling upwards, and (dis)closing with that same fall, only now we know that it's fatal. "We had this idea early on that the trials were tied to the elements," says Schaeffer. "And so Lilia is air, which we don't super-spell out. But we knew that in her trial there would be falling. And Patti LuPone is one of the few people on the planet where you can be like, 'You're falling and you're scared, now you're falling and you're surrendered and it's sublime,' and she's like, 'Roger that!'" You could even say she was falling with style.

ALICE WU-GULLIVER

"It is really sad, and it feels unfair," says Schaeffer of the dark fate meted out to Alice Wu-Gulliver (Ali Ahn), who, seconds after finally making peace with the curse that has haunted her family for generations, is killed (albeit inadvertently) by Agatha. "I know that's been the reaction of viewers, and I understand that, and sort of feel it myself. But it's a show about death. It was an imperative to take that seriously, and feel both the beauty and sadness of it." Alice, in fact, is the only character we see post-death, meeting with Rio before she goes wherever souls go. "We deliberated cutting that scene," admits Schaeffer. "I felt it was important to see Rio take someone. And I wanted Alice to articulate what the audience is feeling — 'This isn't fair.' But she did die a hero."

JEN KALE

Sasheer Zamata's Potions Witch is given an extra-special happy ending, escaping from the Road and flying off into the sunset with her powers — denied to her for over a century thanks to Agatha's meddling ways — well and truly restored. "Her sunset is such a favourite moment of mine," says Schaeffer. "I worked the music really hard there. I really pushed Chris Beck and Michael Paraskevas [co-composers] because this is our only true-blue happily-ever-after in the whole show. I love what they did."

AGATHA ALL ALONG IS ON DISNEY+ NOW



THE EMPIRE MASTERPIECE

Wake In Fright

TED KOTCHEFF'S BOOZE-SOAKED AUSTRALIAN NIGHTMARE

WORDS JAMIE GRAHAM

NO-ONE DOES bleak and nasty quite like the Aussies. *The Boys*, *Wolf Creek*, *Animal Kingdom*, *Snowtown*, *Hounds Of Love*, *Killing Ground*... They're enough to make the *Mad Max* movies seem like a Sunday picnic in Regent's Park, George Miller trimming away the real, sick-making violence as surely as those triangular sarnies are shorn of crusts.

Premiering to rave reactions at the Cannes Film Festival in 1971, *Wake In Fright* is the granddaddy of Australia's savage cinema, a sweat-stained, booze-soaked, forcefully toxic masterpiece that glowers at the vanguard of both the Ozploitation and Australian New Wave movements. Nick Cave calls it "the best and most terrifying film about Australian existence". New Wave luminaries Fred Schepisi, Bruce Beresford and Peter Weir credit it with demonstrating there could be, after decades of stagnation, a national cinema to appeal on the international stage.

Strange, then, that *Wake In Fright* is directed by a Canadian (Ted Kotcheff, who went on to make *First Blood*), scripted by a Jamaican (Evan Jones, adapting Kenneth Cook's 1961 novel), and stars two Englishmen (Gary Bond and Donald Pleasence). Perhaps it needed outsiders to view asked the rugged white-male individualism myth? "That's not us!" cried an audience member when the film opened in Sydney, and flopped. "It's us, it's men," replied Kotcheff, widening the aperture of his lens to illuminate universal machismo.

Wake In Fright — or *Outback*, as it was originally titled in the US and UK — opens in the tinpot town of Tiboonda, as middle-class schoolteacher John Grant (Bond) catches a train to the mining town of Bundanyabba. He's to stay one night before boarding a plane to Sydney. "The Yabba", says a cab driver, is "the best place in Australia... a friendly place", and soon John's accepting a drink from an aggressively chummy copper, Jock (Chips Rafferty). And then another drink, and another, until he's smashed and broke, having gambled his moolah away.

Stuck in The Yabba, John falls in with sloshed quack Doc Tydon (a career-best Pleasence),

barred from practising in Sydney and now surviving in this remote hellhole by playing sawbones for hunks of kangaroo and bread. "What do you do?" asks Grant. "I drink," replies Doc, and so begins a monumental piss-up that lasts for several days and culminates in a horrific kangaroo hunt. Kotcheff, a vegetarian, accompanied a team of licensed hunters on a nighttime expedition to capture the spotlights-and-splatter footage.

Marsupial entrails aside, overt violence is absent from *Wake In Fright*. But like Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974), another bloodless-but-brutal masterpiece that trades in blistering sunlight, forbidding landscapes and male aggression spiked by isolation and deprivation, Kotcheff's film is unremittably tense. Filmed in January 1970 in the mining town of Broken Hill, home to three men for every woman, *Wake In Fright* is shot in scorching reds, yellows and oranges, its celluloid emulsified in sweat. Grimy interiors, meanwhile, were constructed at Ajax Films in the Sydney suburb of Bondi, with crew members feeding

hundreds of flies through holes in the corrugated-iron walls of Doc's shack as he drinks, tussles and, it's suggested, has shit-faced sex with John.

By way of research, Kotcheff stayed in Broken Hill before the shoot, the locals plying him with beer and pleading for fights. "I realised they just wanted contact," the director later recalled of their desire to hit and be hit. Kotcheff poured it all into the movie — no other film so captures that overbearing camaraderie, all booze and banter, as blokes who are usually unable to express their feelings for fear of displaying weakness get plastered and emotional. Tactile, even. "You concentrate on the directing and I'll concentrate on the drinking," Kotcheff remembers Rafferty instructing him on set, and the famous Aussie character actor, who died shortly before the film's release, reportedly lubricated his performance by downing beer in every take, totalling up to 30 pints a day.

Over the course of just five days, Grant comes undone, his lustrous blond locks tousled, his cream suit crumpled and soiled, and his educated



PICKS OF THE MONTH

CHOSEN BY CHRIS HEWITT



1 JOKER: FOLIE À DEUX

(OUT NOW, VARIOUS)

I was not on board at all with Todd Phillips and Joaquin Phoenix's first crack at carving a twisted version of Batman's arch-nemesis, but adore their sequel, which eases back on the scuzziness, dials up the Lady Gaga, and is full of invention, technical excellence and, surprisingly given how cruel the first movie was, no little heart. Naturally, everyone else hated it. They're wrong, I'm right. Trust me, this is no laughing matter.

2 HAWKEYE

(OUT 13 JANUARY, 4K STEELBOOK)

Just in time for, erm, next Christmas comes this physical release of Marvel's most festive offering: a joyous, Shane Black-esque romp which pairs Jeremy Renner's world-weary Avenger with Hailee Steinfeld's pugnacious young archer, Kate Bishop, to glorious effect. One of the best MCU Disney+ shows.

3 THE OUTRUN

(OUT NOW, DVD/BLU-RAY/DIGITAL)

Saoirse Ronan might add another Oscar nomination to her list for this low-budget indie drama, and rightly so, for her turn as a young woman facing up to the destructive nature of her alcoholism is one of her very best. Come for the incredible Nora Fingscheidt-directed performance, stay for the serenity of the Scottish scenery which helps Ronan get back on an even keel.

4 THE QUICK AND THE DEAD

(OUT 6 JANUARY, 4K)

Sam Raimi's Western was coldly received (by fools and philistines) upon its release in 1995. Thankfully, it's been re-evaluated since, mainly by me, but who's counting? Its very premise — a group of gunslingers are embroiled in a duel contest — invites Raimi to go wild with the visual flourishes, while a stunning cast (Sharon Stone, Russell Crowe, Leonardo DiCaprio, Gene Hackman) nimbly navigate clichés, and look fabulous while doing so.

Clockwise from main: Schoolteacher John Grant (Gary Bond) with a bloody kangaroo; Drunk Doc Tydon (Donald Pleasence); Gambling man Tydon; The local firing squad with Grant (front); Grant quenches his thirst in the desert.



fan since attending the original premiere in 1971, two years before *Mean Streets* announced him as a major voice in New Hollywood.

"A deeply — and I mean deeply — unsettling and disturbing movie," is how Scorsese described it, saying it left him "speechless". The menfolk of The Yabba would raise a glass or 20 to that. "Come and have a drink, mate," says one. "C'mon, the beer's real good here," offers another. And they won't take no for an answer. "What's the matter with you people?" rages Grant. "You burn your house down, murder your wife, rape your child, that's alright! Not have a flaming bloody drink with you... that's the end of the bloody world!"

WAKE IN FRIGHT IS OUT NOW ON DVD AND BLU-RAY

exterior cracked open to reveal the primitive man within — lying, cheating, fucking, killing. The films of the Australian New Wave thrummed with vitality, fuelled by nature, violence and sexuality. *Wake In Fright* has them on tap, and is perhaps soaked in the blood of Australia's colonial history. Is it just coincidence that Grant speaks with the clipped tones of an English gentleman, and that he desires to visit the green and pleasant land? As Peter Weir's New Wave classic *Picnic At Hanging Rock* showed us, the Australian countryside is no place for etiquette. There, the landscape swallowed people whole; here, it chews up Grant and spits him out.

Only existing in censored, degraded prints after its master negative went missing, *Wake In Fright* was for decades labelled Australia's great lost film, until its editor, Anthony Buckley, located the original film and sound elements in CBS' Pittsburgh archives. Digitally remastered, this queasy nightmare of a movie returned to Cannes in 2009. Martin Scorsese was a key figure behind its restoration — he'd been a vocal





SPOILER SPECIAL

Strange Darling

**DIRECTOR JT MOLLNER
ON THE BEST BITS OF HIS
TWISTY THRILLER**

WORDS **NICK DE SEMLYEN**

IN LATE JULY, many people heard about *Strange Darling* for the first time, when horror master Stephen King tweeted about it, twice. He called it “a clever masterpiece”, before adding, “I wish I could say more... but it’s one of those films that’s too clever to spoil, so best to say nothing.” He was right: JT Mollner’s cat-and-mouse serial-killer thriller is near-impossible to describe in advance without ruining its bleak, sneaky surprises. But now the cat and mouse are out of the bag, we called Mollner to probe him on all the film’s twists and turns.

TRUE OR FALSE

Before the action begins, text scrolls down the screen, establishing that we’re about to learn about “the most prolific and unique American serial killer of the 21st century”. We also learn that *Strange Darling* is based on true events. Apparently. “Who isn’t influenced by the Coen Brothers?” laughs Mollner of the *Fargo*-esque fake-out. “I remember hearing that *Fargo* was a true story from my dad, who’d just gone to see it. He was like, ‘You have to see this movie, because if it wasn’t true, it would be ridiculous.’” Some people, he says, have come away believing *Strange Darling* is a quasi-documentary, something he doesn’t want to dispel completely. “There’s much more truth to this than there was

to *Fargo*. It’s closer to *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. I’ve tried not to talk too much about it, because I do like that discourse.”

THE LADY ARRIVES

Strange Darling is essentially a two-hander, following The Lady (Willa Fitzgerald) and The Demon (Kyle Gallner). In the exceptional opening shot, we see the former, seemingly a distressed damsel being chased by the psychotic Demon, running towards the camera in ultra-slo-mo as credits roll. It was stressful to shoot, for multiple reasons. “We’d been shooting for four days and the production was shut down; there were a couple of executives who didn’t like the dailies,” reveals Mollner. “Doing that shot, I remember looking around and thinking the crew were like the *Walking Dead* — ‘They have no idea we’re already dead.’ I felt like we were shooting for our lives.” Still, they nailed it in four takes, ultimately using the second one. “Willa had a very keen awareness of what the character was going through as she ran... She would get to the end of each run, and she was just in tears, and they were very sincere.”

KICKING THE TYRES

Like *Pulp Fiction*, *Strange Darling* tells its tale out of order, with Chapter 3 (‘Can You Help



Me, Please?") followed by Chapter 5 ('Here, Kitty, Kitty...') and then Chapter 1 ('Mister Snuffles'). In that one, we see The Lady and The Demon meet for the first time, in a car outside a hotel, soaked in intense blue light. "We were able to shoot that on a stage and it was a very pleasant day," says Mollner. "There are two scenes in the car and tonally they're entirely different, because we know so much more when we come back to it." For now, there's industrial-strength flirting — they'll soon be inside the hotel, playing BDSM sex games — and a key question, posed by her to him: "Are you a serial killer?" "No," he replies.

THE BIG BREAKFAST

Jumping forward again in time, we witness an older, rural couple played by Ed Begley Jr and Barbara Hershey enjoy the most decadent breakfast since *Phantom Thread*: fried eggs, sausages, pancakes, canned fruit, syrup, whipped cream, and enough butter to take down a rhino. "I've seen some weird TikToks," laughs Mollner of the monstrous feast going viral. "As I was writing *The Mountain People*, it just came to me. It was a way to portray an all-too-common slice of Americana when it comes to diet. And

a chance to give the audience a chance to take a breath and a laugh."

THE REVEAL

Any laughter is soon cut short, however, when one of the sweet pair is murdered by the film's female protagonist. Who, in case you were wondering, *is* a serial killer, known as The Electric Lady. The high-voltage twist comes approximately halfway through the 96-minute film's runtime. "I never thought of it as being a film that hinged completely on a twist," says Mollner. "I knew some people were going to know exactly where it's going from the very beginning — and luckily it's very few. I thought there would be more, honestly. That opening chapter, Chapter 3, if you go back and watch it, knowing where it's going, we're giving hints all over the place."

ICING THE DEMON

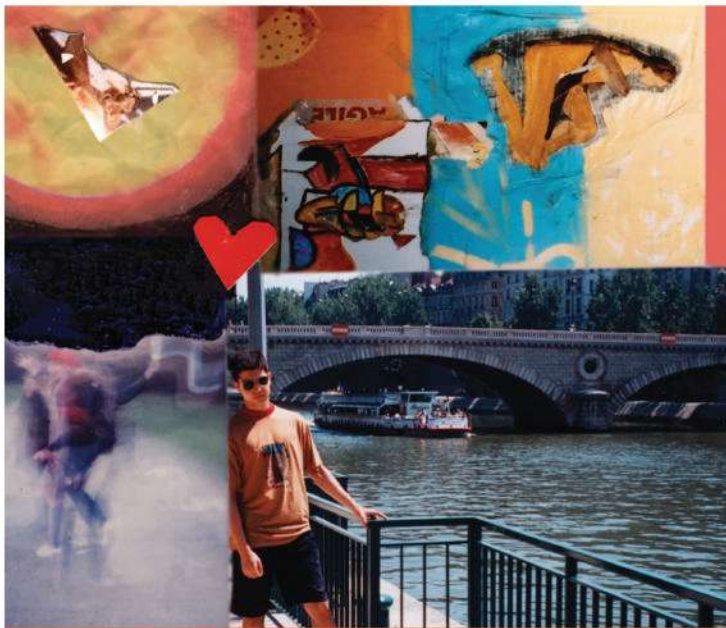
With The Lady handcuffed to a freezer, in which she has been hiding from The Demon — revealed to actually be a cop, rather than a killer — it looks like she has been finally cornered. But in a shock twist, she gets the upper hand, using bear spray on The Demon before biting his neck and causing him to bleed to death. "It's the 'break-up' scene," says Mollner. "I was rewriting it up until

the day before we shot it, because I can't stand it when I watch a movie and I'm like, 'There's no way in hell that could have happened.' The first version of it had her handcuffed to a stove. In another version she was outside the freezer. It may have been Willa's idea, but we came to the conclusion that she should just be in there and never get out of it. Even though it's a stretch, what happens there... I think it works."

THE LADY EXITS

She uses her wiles on two other cops, is released from her cuffs, and starts being escorted to a hospital. But The Electric Lady fails to get away clean, murdering twice more before being fatally shot herself. The final shot of the film is another long take of Fitzgerald, a bravura death scene that has left audiences feeling conflicted, despite all the bloody mayhem of the past 90 minutes. "That was my entire goal," says Mollner. "Because that's the human condition. Willa and I talked a lot about how we wanted to make a movie about a killer who was not necessarily a sociopath. Because there's remorse, there's regret, there's sadness, there's longing for connection... It's just, you know, she's misguided." Not to mention a truly terrible breakfast guest.

STRANGE DARLING IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DIGITAL



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Ben Southwell in collaboration with Raven Armoury
have produced this limited edition bronze of Talos Awakes
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Based on effects characters created by Ray Harryhausen for a Charles H. Schneer Production.
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THIS MONTH HORROR TRENDS

WRITING ABOUT FRIGHTFEST — the UK's big horror event, held in competition with the Notting Hill Carnival — sometimes feels like this column's equivalent of the 'what I did over the summer holiday' essay. I'll filter in actual reviews of films I saw in August that will stay relevant probably for years, as they percolate to UK release. But cramming 60-plus new horror films into a short viewing time allows for a sense of where exactly scary movies are in the 2024-'25 season.

Here are some typical premises — not all FF films, but all FF-type films:

- An estate agent hires a just-paroled convict to stay in a haunted house for a week to perform a spiritual cleansing ritual so the property can be certified ghost-free... previous exorcists haven't lasted more than four days, so sending in a guy who'll go to jail if he's forced out of the house by supernatural phenomena seems the only way to get the job done (*I Will Never Leave You Alone*).
- A mother tells her two sons the world has ended and that they'll be got by monsters if they venture too far from their isolated house in the woods... to which they must be attached by ropes at all times (*Never Let Go*).
- Brother-and-sister armed robbers evade the cops by entering a farmhouse which is also a time machine so they can hide out in the past for a couple of weeks... only the time warp wants to keep them much longer (*Things Will Be Different*).
- With alien spaceships hovering over major

cities, lone scientists in underground facilities work on a bioweapon while holding regular Zoom calls, which go to show how they are individually cracking up or being overwhelmed by invaders (*The Bunker*).

- Random folk are stuck in a viewing room in — yep — the deep, dark woods and observed every night by non-human voyeurs (*The Watched*).
- A gay artist tries to get over a bad break-up by working on new paintings in — now wait for it! — an isolated cabin in the woods, which might be haunted by a homophobic serial-killer (*Ladybug*).
- A teenager suffers from crippling anxiety and can't leave an old dark house thanks to a real or imaginary haunting fostered by a children's book (*Fright*).
- Pranksters hide in a house to fake a haunting for an internet challenge, but might be competing with real spooks to terrorise a fraudulent paranormal author (*Ghost Game*).



Top to bottom: Halle Berry as a protective mum in *Never Let Go*; Dakota Fanning stars in *The Watched*.

So cabins in the woods, haunted mansions, lonely shacks, abandoned palaces and dimensional gateways which look like cramped accommodation are currently hot in horror. Why? Obviously, there's never been a shortage of stories like this — but just now there's a virtual flood.

My guess is that these are the bright ideas filmmakers had during lockdown — when, like everyone else, they were stuck at home for months on end. A few years on, those ideas have been turned into films and they're coming onto the market at once, giving the illusion that agoraphobia is the only phobia in town. Maybe what comes next will be a flood of movies about fear of wide-open spaces.

CRYPT KEEPERS KIM'S PICK OF THE WEIRD AND WONDERFUL

CHARLOTTE (DIGITAL)

Distressed schoolgirl Charlotte (Georgia Conlan, who directed and co-wrote), fleeing an unhappy home, seeks refuge with a dodgy ex-offender (Dean Kilbey), which is so much his fantasy of what he'd like to happen that even he can't quite believe her story. A cunningly contrived British cat-and-mouse tale.

HAUNTED ULSTER LIVE (DIGITAL)

A 'broadcast footage' horror in the tradition of *Late Night With The Devil*, Dominic O'Neill's *Haunted Ulster Live* consists of raw footage of a 1998 Halloween special, transmitted from a house stalked by a phantom known as Black Foot Jack. It all goes disturbingly wrong very quickly.

HOME SWEET HOME: WHERE EVIL LIVES (DIGITAL)

Writer-director Thomas Sieben's single-take nightmare follows pregnant Maria around an isolated mansion with a colonial curse on it, as a happy-housewife-turned-haunted-detective hero becomes a shrieking paranoid beset by supernatural and human evil.

LAST STRAW (DIGITAL)

A familiar set-up: Jessica Belkin, shift manager of an all-night diner, is hassled by creeps in masks. Alan Scott Neal's film loops back several times, showing the escalating violence from the point of view of the harassed manager, then from other participants in her overnight ordeal. An effective suspense piece.

THE VOUDALAK (DIGITAL)

Patriarch Gorchia returns home turned into a nasty vampire and terrorises his family. Adrien Beau's film of Aleksey Tolstoy's tale *The Voudalak* ingeniously deploys a reverse *Muppet Christmas Carol* effect, Gorchia a disturbing man-puppet while his relatives/victims are human actors.





STORY OF THE SHOT

Jaws

BLONDE VS. SHARK

WORDS IAN FREER

THE ORIGIN

In Peter Benchley's smash-hit novel, the great white shark appears in the opening line: "The great fish moved silently through the night water, propelled by short sweeps of its crescent tail." In Steven Spielberg's 1975 adaptation, however, it has to wait for its grand entrance — and not because Bruce the mechanical shark wasn't working properly.

"The book does describe the shark approaching but I thought it would be scary not to show it at all," Spielberg told biographer Laurent Bouzereau. "If the shark had come out of the water, it would have been spectacular, but there would have been nothing primal about it — it would have been just another monster moment that all of us had seen already in other films."

To play the victim who begins the shark's killing spree, Chrissie Watkins, Spielberg went for stuntwoman Susan Backlinie "because I needed somebody who was great in the water... and knew how to endure what I imagined was going to be a whole lot of violent shaking." For Backlinie, Spielberg's initial direction was

simple. "The first thing [Spielberg] said to me was, 'When your scene is done, I want everyone under the seats with the popcorn and bubblegum,'" she recalled. "I think we did that."

THE SHOOT

Chrissie's watery demise was shot at Cow Bay, Martha's Vineyard, on 29 June 1974. Although it was a nocturnal skinny dip, the scene was shot day-for-night. "I didn't want to shoot at night on the ocean because darkness only extends as far as the arcs will light the water, so you'll never see the horizon," said the filmmaker, who drew from cinematographer Freddie Young's day-for-night work on David Lean's *Lawrence Of Arabia*, noting "the desert is a sea without water".

When it came to the sustained attack, Backlinie was attached to cables that led to two pylons on the beach. Five crew members were on one side, another five were on the other, and a weird tug-of-war ensued, with Backlinie yanked about. "I didn't have the hard work to do," she recalled. "I just sat there and got pulled

Alamy, Imago, Netflix

INSTANT TRIVIA

1

Straight out of high school, Backlinie performed as a mermaid at Weeki Wachee Springs State Park before moving to California to pursue a film career.

2

The rumour that Backlinie broke a rib shooting the scene is untrue, but it was nonetheless gruelling. "We would film from anywhere from 6 to 7 in the morning 'til 9 because of the light... I was home and exhausted at the end of the day."

3

To capture the action, cinematographer Bill Butler devised "a water box" that was like a reinforced fish tank and allowed the camera to stay dry while bobbing up and down at sea level.

4

Recording the screams for the scene on a soundstage, Backlinie leaned back in a bassinet and had water poured into her mouth to replicate being in the ocean.

around." For Spielberg, it was all about the power of suggestion. "I wanted the jerking motion of the first victim to trigger our imagination about what was going on below."

THE LEGACY

Made even more ferocious by John Williams' score, Chrissie's attack has entered pop culture, spoofed on everything from the obvious (*The Simpsons*) to the not-so-obvious (*Doc Martin*) — Spielberg and Backlinie even parodied their own handiwork in *1941*, substituting shark for submarine. For the stuntwoman, who sadly passed away earlier this year, it was a scene that lived forever. "Younger guys would say to me, 'You know, you were the first woman I ever saw with no clothes on.' I'd just laugh and say, 'Okay!' You hope it was a good view."

JAWS IS OUT ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DIGITAL.

Top: Chrissie Watkins (Susan Backlinie) comes a cropper. Right: Macon Blair.

SPECIAL THANKS TO...

MACON BLAIR

REBEL RIDGE DIRECTOR JEREMY SAULNIER ON GIVING PROPS TO HIS BEST BUD



OFTEN IT'S NEAR-IMPOSSIBLE to guess the scenario when it comes to figuring out the connections referenced in end-credit acknowledgements. Yet this might be the least surprising Special Thanks in the history of Specially Thanking. Given that he starred in Jeremy Saulnier's first three movies (*Murder Party*, *Blue Ruin* and *Green Room*), and wrote his fourth (*Hold The Dark*), it would have been more of a shock if Macon Blair *hadn't* been mentioned in the credits of *Rebel Ridge*, Saulnier's latest thriller. "We're creative partners," says Saulnier. "Our first film was, I think, when he was 12 and I was 11 years old. He's my first script-read, he's my last script-read. He helps get me through the process. We're both kids from Virginia navigating Hollywood. I trust his taste."

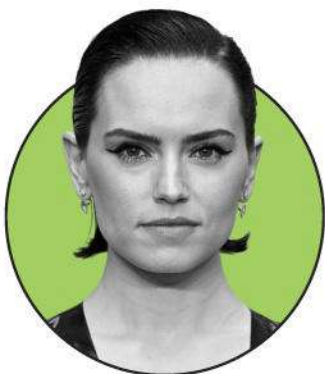
That extends to music as well. "His knowledge of film and music is very important. I don't dig in the crates," says Saulnier, miming rifling through boxes at a record store. "I'm like, 'Make me a mixtape,' and he's the guy making the mixtape. So he consults on all the music choices. And his brothers, who are also childhood friends, are the ones that compose [for] all my films." The Blair Pitch Project, if you will.

Blair is also executive producer on *Rebel Ridge*, but doesn't appear in the film, the first time he has been entirely off screen on a Saulnier joint. "There was talk, but one of his films went, and he had to go direct," explains Saulnier, presumably referencing Blair's remake of *The Toxic Avenger*. "We miss him, but he'll be back." And even if he's too busy to appear on screen, Saulnier has his boy covered. "He'll always get 'Special Thanks' on my movies." That's a lifetime guarantee. CHRIS HEWITT

REBEL RIDGE IS ON NETFLIX NOW

Time Capsule

Daisy Ridley



THE *MAGPIE* STAR ON THE IMAGES OF HER CAREER (SO FAR)

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

DAISY RIDLEY'S COME a long way since she made her debut riding a ghost train and pretending to choke on a sweet in *Casualty* in 2013. "We were filming in Cardiff and I was staying in a hotel, and it was so mind-boggling to me," she laughs. Since then, the British actor has anchored a *Star Wars* trilogy and used her clout to make a string of indies like this month's psychological thriller, *Magpie*. "I haven't made that many movies," she admits — usually a problem for Time Capsule. But not only are these significant movies, "It's quite nice, because most of them I have quite strong memories of." So, let the memories flow...

THREE FOR SORROW *MAGPIE* (2024)

"What comes back to me is the horrible guilt I felt in this scene, if people have seen the movie, knowing what transpires. This is the first time my character, Anette, and Matilda Lutz's character, Alicia, the two women in this triangle with Shazad Latif, are really meeting. I was looking forward to this. Actually, it was really quite fun, and it was such a beautiful evening. The road was supposed to be locked down and that car in the distance slipped through. So much of us wanting to do a film-within-the-film was because we love movies, and we wanted that feeling of making a movie and being on a set and in trailers."



KEEPING ON TRACK *MURDER ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS* (2017)

"Oh, Ken! (*Kenneth Branagh of course plays famed sleuth Poirot.*) This was actually my audition scene. I was so terrified to do the audition, and I didn't think I did a very good job, so was very thrilled when I got the film. Fun fact: in this scene, I forgot a line and had a real, proper, momentary panic, and then righted myself and moved on, and it was kept in the film. Maybe I shouldn't say that, because maybe people just thought that was good acting! But all of that is real. The train was really there, the snow is fake, but real fake snow, and it was just the most amazing situation."



A LONG TIME AGO... *STAR WARS: EPISODE VII — THE FORCE AWAKENS* (2015)

"That was the first read-through. I remember I was so scared. I had to go for many wees. I literally had to keep going, 'I'm so sorry,' because I was so nervous. They sat me between Carrie [Fisher] and Harrison [Ford], and it was nerve-racking, but everyone was so lovely. The read-through went by in a blur, and I think I was terrible. No, really! Afterwards, J.J. [Abrams, director] was like, 'Hey, um, we're just going to talk through everything.' They probably thought, 'What have we done?', but it was too late!"



Alamy, Disney, Imago, Signature, Vertigo



JUST DESERT STAR WARS: EPISODE IX — THE RISE OF SKYWALKER (2019)

"The desert is absolutely beautiful. It's Wadi Rum in Jordan. Famously, *Lawrence Of Arabia* was shot there. But these incredible sandstorms happen, and you literally just have to down tools until it passes. So I'm squinting a lot more than the others. I think this was us seeing the carnival for the first time, and it was the most beautiful thing, with all of these incredible supporting artists. A lot of the army were playing some of the aliens, and it was a really fun merging of worlds, just this explosion of colour and life."



MAKING A SPLASH YOUNG WOMAN AND THE SEA (2024)

"This is the first attempt at the swim [in the film]. I remember having to do drowning acting in the sea, and as you can see, we're really out there, and the currents are happening, and because of the wash of the [accompanying tugboat] Alsace, there was a lot going on. I remember I had to keep in line with the camera boat and with the Alsace. But when you watch the movie, you can feel that we're out there. I feel very happy I did it, but it was nine days of real, tough open swimming."



DEAD TIRED SOMETIMES I THINK ABOUT DYING (2023)

"The film is very rooted in reality, except for these beautiful sequences which are quite fantastical and imaginative, and represent Fran's imagination and where she feels comfortable. What was fun for me is that this is the *Goonies* beach. *The Goonies* was filmed in Astoria, and this was a little way away, but I was like, 'Oh, the *Goonies* beach!' The wonderful art department had built this sort of shelter and luckily, because it was freezing, I was able to keep my socks on, which is always important."



NOT MAKING A SPLASH CHAOS WALKING (2021)

"The filming of this was... not without its difficulties. Doug [Liman] works in a way that is different to most people that I've worked with. Very off-the-cuff. But this scene, I remember feeling the abject terror of playing someone who cannot swim, and going out into quite a fast running river. I can swim, but when you're playing someone who can't swim, the panic gets to you. But I love that outfit, love that wig, and we take what we can from these things."

MAGPIE IS OUT NOW ON DIGITAL



RED ROOM OF PAIN STAR WARS: EPISODE VIII — THE LAST JEDI (2017)

"I feel like they couldn't see very well in those costumes. There was one shot in this that I remember, a dolly tracking shot that had to go through all of the fighting to find us, and I remember the timing of it. You're trying to do the fight, but also be very aware of when the camera is actually going to arrive. And the floor was just so hilariously shiny. I remember Sonny [Merchant], who is a wonderful standby props guy, running in and shining the shiny floor."



The Ultimate Empire Quiz

EVERY MONTH, WE WILL TEST
YOUR MOVIE KNOWLEDGE.
ARE YOU READY?

THIS MONTH

CHRISTMAS MOVIES



- 1** What is the title of the film-within-a-film that plays throughout *Home Alone*?
- 2** In each instalment in the *National Lampoon's Vacation* series, the Griswold children, Russ and Audrey, have been played by two different actors. Who takes the roles in *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*?
- 3** Can you remember the final line of *It's A Wonderful Life*?
- 4** Judy Garland's Christmas classic song, 'Have Yourself A Merry Little Christmas', was written for which film?
- 5** When he arrives in New York, Buddy The Elf in *Elf* finds employment at which



real-life department store, which sadly closed down in 1987?

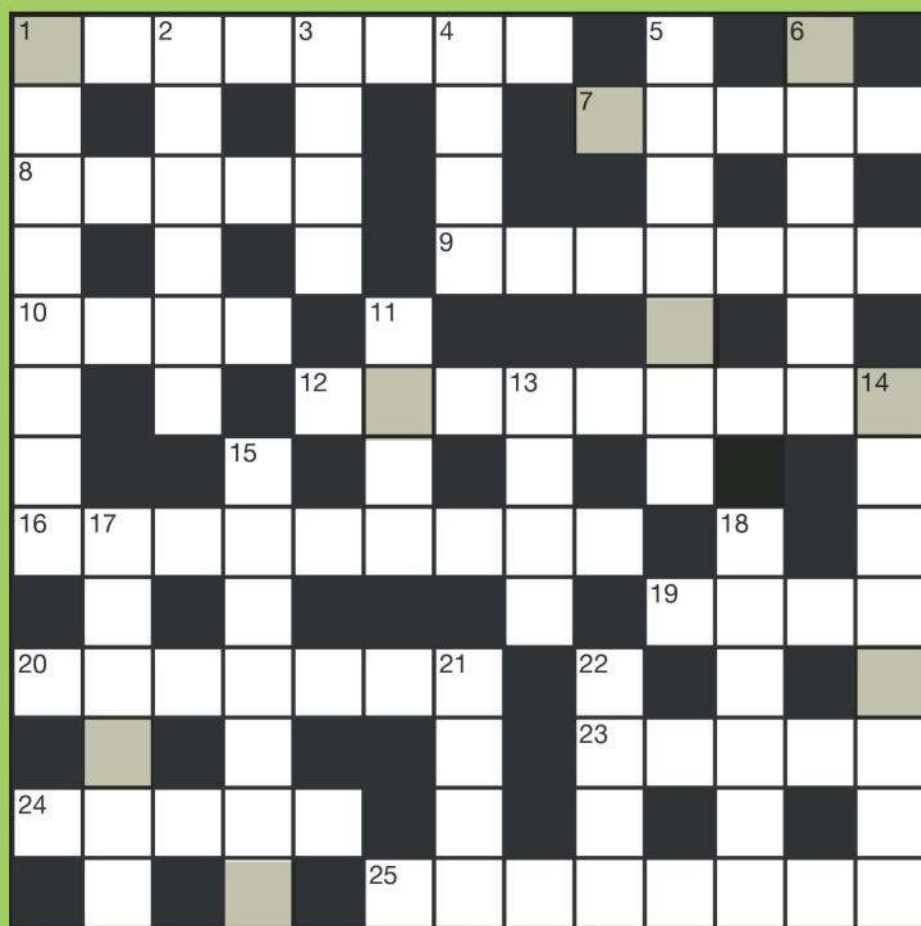
- 6** What is the name of the Christmas song that kicks off Joe Dante's *Gremlins*?
- 7** Which character links the following actors: Carol Kane, Jim Carrey, Will Ferrell?
- 8** He would one day play the actual Big Lebowski. But before that, this actor took the title role in *Santa Claus: The Movie*. Who is he?
- 9** Tim Allen becomes Father Christmas in *The Santa Clause* (pictured above). But what is his character's real name?
- 10** Name the famous figures who cameo as themselves in the Siblings Anonymous scene in *Fred Claus*. A point for each.
- 11** In *Die Hard*, how much money is Hans Gruber planning to steal (in negotiable bearer bonds) from the Nakatomi vault on Christmas Eve?



- 12** Emma Thompson thinks Alan Rickman has bought her an expensive necklace for Christmas in *Love Actually*. What does he actually get her, the philandering cad?
- 13** Which of these Shane Black films is NOT set at Christmas: *Lethal Weapon*, *The Last Boy Scout*, *The Long Kiss Goodnight*, *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*?
- 14** Name the two people who provide Jack Skellington's voice (one speaking, one singing) in *The Nightmare Before Christmas*.
- 15** The tagline for which Christmas movie read, "He doesn't care if you're naughty or nice"?
- 16** Which Oscar-winning director cameos as a psycho Santa in *Hot Fuzz*?
- 17** Who wrote the original songs for *The Muppet Christmas Carol*?
- 18** Which movie do Paul Giamatti's Paul and Dominic Sessa's Angus go to see on Christmas Day in *The Holdovers*?
- 19** Which MCU Christmas movie boasts a scene where the hero takes out some bad guys with exploding baubles?
- 20** Who won the Best Supporting Actor Oscar for playing Kris Kringle in the original *Miracle On 34th Street*?

ANSWERS 1 'Angels With Filthy Souls' 2 Johnny Galecki and Juliette Lewis 3 "Attaboy, Clarence." 4 *Meet Me In St. Louis* 5 Gimbels 6 'Christmas (Baby Please Come Home)' by Darlene Love 7 *The Ghost Of Christmas Present* (from *Scrooged*, a Christmas Carol and *Spirited*, respectively) 8 David Huddleston 9 Scott Calvin 10 Frank Stallone, Roger Clinton Jr, Stephen Baldwin 11 \$640 million 12 Joni Mitchell's *Both Sides Now* on CD 13 *The Last Boy Scout* 14 Chrs Sarandon (speaking), Danny Elfman (singing) 15 *Bad Santa* 16 Peter Jackson 17 Paul Williams 18 *Little Big Man* 19 *Iron Man 3* 20 Edmund Gwenn

CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1 Pete Mitchell's call sign (8)
 7 See **22 Down**
 8 Cooper, whose movies include *The Bourne Identity*, *The Kingdom* and *Adaptation* (5)
 9 Nationality of Rebecca Ferguson, Alicia Vikander and a chef (7)
 10 Operatic anthology movie with segments by Altman, Godard, Jarman and others (4)
 12 Western based on real events that features Kurt Russell and Val Kilmer (9)
 16 Jacques Tournier's classic 1942 horror (3,6)
 19 Moore from *The Substance* (4)
 20 See **21 Down**
 23 His name is Morricone (5)
 24 The title used by Orlok, Olaf and Edmond Dantès (5)
 25 Romantic drama directed by Angelina Jolie in which she co-stars with Brad Pitt (2,3,3)

DOWN

- 1 Dominic Toretto maybe, or could be a Statham hitman (8)
 2 They also call him Mister Tibbs! (6)
 3 Ron Howard sports film (4)
 4 All-star musical flop from Tom Hooper (4)
 5 See **15 Down**
 6 Renate Reinsve is the worst one in the world (6)
 11 — *Rabbit* (Taika Waititi film) (4)
 13 Disney animation about a dog who thinks he has superpowers (4)
 14 Daniel, director who made *Life* and *Morbius* (8)
 15/5 **Down** Billings in a film's title sequence (7,7)
 17 Could be Brie, could be Pill (6)
 18 Weaver who tries to stay on the road in Spielberg's *Duel* (6)
 21/20 **Across** His roles have included Bill Tanner and most of the men in *Men* (4,7)
 22/7 **Across** Actor who plays Scott Evil and voices Howard The Duck (4,5)

COMPETITION

WIN!

SCALEXTRIC
FILM-TIE-IN KIT

REMEMBER WHEN THE best bit of Christmas Day was unwrapping a new Scalextric? Well, recreate that feeling with this issue's competition, as we've got two film-related Scalextric sets to give away to one winner. First, the brand-new C4497 *John Wick* Ford Mustang Boss 429 Slot Car (RRP £56.99) — the first time Scalextric has recreated any of the cars from the *John Wick* films. With its blistering acceleration, it threatens to leave any competition in the dust — competition in this case being the DeLorean and K.I.T.T. from the *Back To The Future Vs Knight Rider* Race Set (RRP £160). To enter, crack the crossword, solve the anagram and follow the instructions below. Burn rubber!

AVAILABLE TO BUY AT UK.SCALEXTRIC.COM

COMPETITION ENDS 13 JANUARY

HOW TO ENTER Take the letters from each coloured square and rearrange them to form the name of an actor, director or character. Visit www.empireonline.com/crossword and fill out the form, along with your answer, in the provided field. Entry is free and closes at midnight on 13 August. Winners are selected at random. See below for terms and conditions.

JANUARY'S ANSWERS **ACROSS:** 1 Krypton, 5 Isle, 9 Assault, 10 Cliff, 11 Keen, 12 Jurassic, 14 Felson, 15 Skills, 18 All Night, 20 Long, 23 Crowe, 24 Endgame, 25 Side, 26 Kennedy. **DOWN:** 2 Russell, 3 Paul, 4 Outrun, 6 Swiss, 7 Effects, 8 Park, 10 Cracks, 13 Louise, 14 Frances, 16 Leonard, 17 Phoebe, 19 Lloyd, 21 Grey, 22 Eden. **ANAGRAM** LUTHEN RAE

TERMS AND CONDITIONS: One entry per person. Entries are free. Entries must be received before 14 January or will not be valid. The Competition is only open to people aged 18 and over who live in the United Kingdom and are not a Bauer employee or their immediate family. One winner will be selected at random from all valid entries. Competition promoted by H Bauer Publishing t/a Empire ("Empire"). Empire's choice of winner is final, and no correspondence will be entered into in this regard. The winner will be notified, via email, between seven and ten days after the competition ends. Empire will email the winner a maximum of three times. If the winner does not respond to the message within 14 days of the competition's end, Empire will select another winner at random and the original winner will not win a prize. Empire is not responsible for late delivery or unsatisfactory quality of the prize. Entrants agree to the collection of their personal data in accordance with Empire's privacy policy: <http://www.bauerdatapromise.co.uk/>. Winner's personal details will be given to prize provider to arrange delivery of the prize. Bauer reserves the right to amend or cancel these terms or any aspect of the competition (including the prize) at any time if required for reasons beyond its control. Any questions, please email empire@bauermedia.co.uk. Complaints will not be considered if made more than 30 days after the competition ends. Winner's details available on request (after the competition ends) by emailing empire@bauermedia.co.uk. For full T&Cs see <http://www.bauerlegal.co.uk/competition-terms.html>



CLASSIC SCENE

'LA MARSEILLAISE'

Casablanca

CHOSEN BY
DAN AYKROYD
(ACTOR)

Dan Aykroyd: "The scene in *Casablanca*, where the German officers begin singing, and then Rick nods his head for the band to strike up 'La Marseillaise'. Rick hardly moves — he flicks his eyelash, and they start to play, and do a beautiful, rousing version of it and the Germans have to scurry away like the rats they were at the time. It's about righteousness and right things. It's just right."

INT. RICK'S CAFÉ AMERICAIN — NIGHT
Victor Laszlo (Paul Henreid) is talking to Rick Blaine (Humphrey Bogart), owner of the bar, in an attempt to get Rick to help him and his wife, Ilsa Lund (Ingrid Bergman), to obtain documents so they can escape Casablanca. He doesn't know that Rick and Ilsa were once lovers...

LASZLO: Are you enough of a businessman to appreciate an offer of 100,000 francs?

RICK: I appreciate it, but I don't accept it.

LASZLO: I'll raise it to 200,000.

RICK: My friend, you could make it a million

francs or three. My answer would still be the same.

LASZLO: There must be some reason why you won't let me have them.

RICK: There is. I suggest that you ask your wife.

LASZLO: I beg your pardon?

RICK: I said, "Ask your wife."

LASZLO: My wife?

RICK: Yes.

At that, the sounds of singing can be heard coming from downstairs. It's a group of German soldiers belting out 'Die Wacht Am Rhein'.

Rick crosses to the top of the stairs to watch them. Major Strasser (Conrad Veidt) is singing along with them. Captain Renault (Claude Rains) looks up at Rick and Laszlo, with a wry expression on his face.

Laszlo walks down the stairs. Ilsa watches him walk past. He walks up to the house band.

LASZLO: Play 'La Marseillaise'. Play it.

The band leader looks up at Rick, who, having come downstairs, gives him the nod. They strike up 'La Marseillaise', which Laszlo starts singing heartily. Almost immediately, the customers of Rick's Café stand up and join in.

Major Strasser, discomfited, motions for his men to sing louder. But the voices singing the French national anthem are louder and stronger, and drown out his men. Strasser and his men sit down. As Laszlo continues to sing, and inspire a roomful of people in a show of defiance, Ilsa looks lovingly at him.

As the song finishes, a sobbing Yvonne (Madeleine LeBeau) cries out.

YVONNE: *Vive la France! Vive la démocratie!*

Everyone — well, almost everyone — in the place cheers wildly. Some men slap Laszlo on the back. Major Strasser stands up and makes a beeline for Captain Renault.

STRASSER: You see what I mean? If Laszlo's presence in a café can inspire this unfortunate demonstration, what more will his presence in Casablanca bring on? I advise that this place be shut up at once.

RENAULT: But everybody's having such a good time.

STRASSER: Yes. Much too good a time. The place is to be closed.

RENAULT: But I have no excuse to close it.

STRASSER: Find one.

Strasser leaves. Renault picks up his cap. As Laszlo is being toasted, Renault steps into the middle of the room and blows his whistle.

RENAULT: Everybody is to leave here immediately. This café is closed until further notice! Clear the room at once!

There are groans, but everyone obeys his orders. As they begin leaving, Rick approaches Renault.

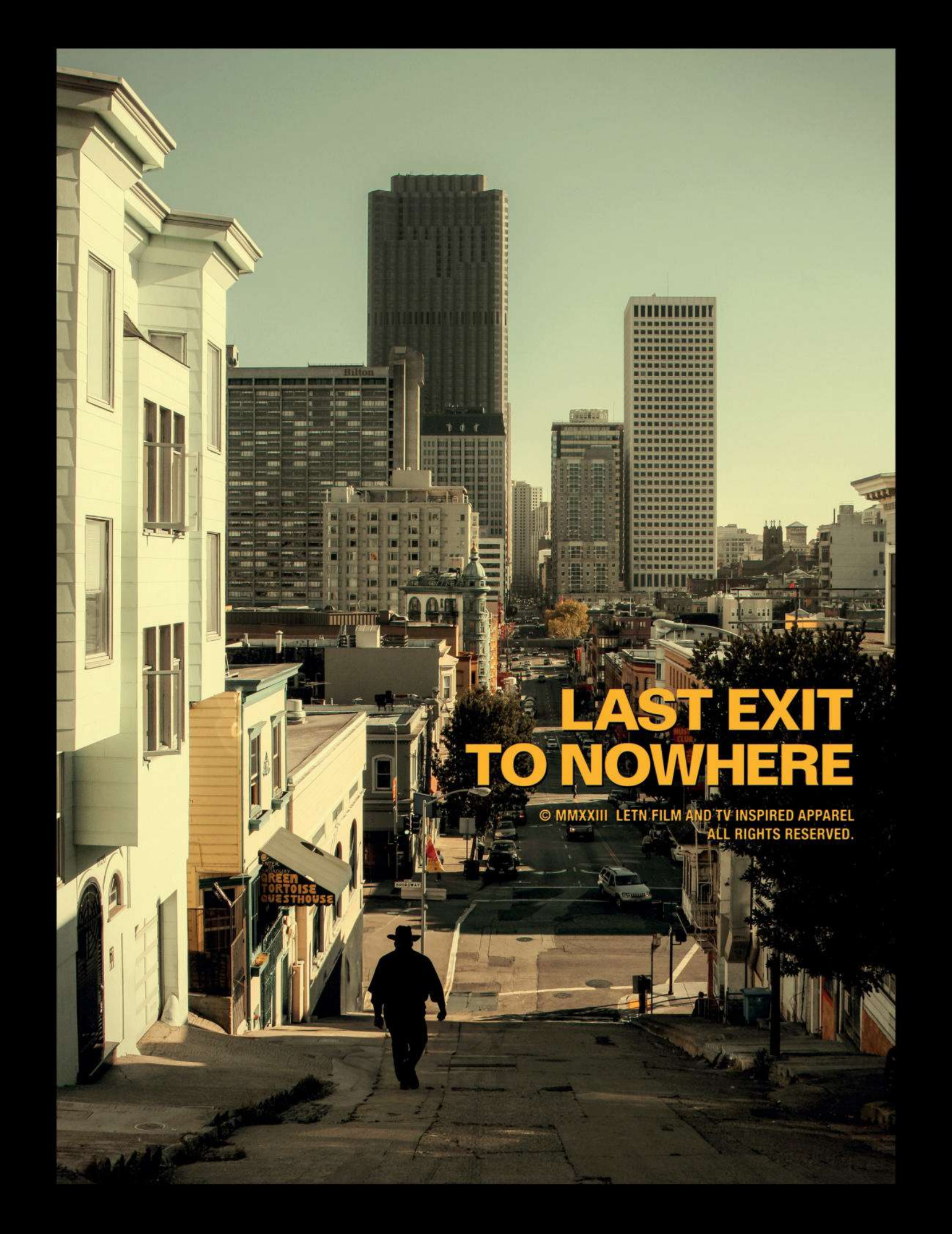
RICK: How can he close me up? On what grounds?

RENAULT: I'm shocked — shocked — to find that gambling is going on in here.

Emil (Marcel Dalio), a croupier on Rick's staff, appears and hands Renault a pile of cash.

EMIL: Your winnings, sir.

RENAULT: Oh, thank you very much. Everybody out at once!



LAST EXIT TO NOWHERE

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FX

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